EDGE

JUST CAUSE 3

AVALANCHE SPARKS A REVOLUTION FOR OPEN-WORLD ACTION GAMES

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HALO 5: GUARDIANS
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GUITAR HERO LIVE
LIFE IS STRANGE
NEED FOR SPEED
TALES FROM THE
BORDERLANDS

WORLDS ADRIFT

THE MINECRAFT
FOR A NEW
GENERATION

#287

CHRISTMAS 2015

When you talk about destruction, count us in

In presenting the tale of Rico Rodriguez and his lynchpin role in a revolution against the dictator General Di Ravello, *Just Cause 3* is all about handing power to the people, so it's appropriate that the game has been designed with its players' desires placed front and centre. That is the sensible way to make a sequel, but not every studio has as much feedback to work with as Avalanche, which saw *Just Cause 2* bent into all sorts of shapes by a frenzied modding community, and player-made videos uploaded by the truckload. It was easy to see what everyone wanted: an even more expansive environment, even more toys to play with, and even more ways to unleash hell. Then the studio just had to go and make it.

The result is a game that bundles up the best bits of the previous title, straps explosives to the package, lights the whole thing on fire, and then catapults it into the sun. We spent two days playing *Just Cause 3* for this issue's cover story, and returned only wanting more, which is how these things should always conclude. Our report begins on p58.

Where *Just Cause 3* won't deliver on the demands of its audience – at least not at launch – is in multiplayer. For that, we look to *Worlds Adrift* (p78), the online sandbox adventure in construction at Bossa Studios. It's a game that sees the company shaking out its wings and taking flight, following up its physics experiments in *Surgeon Simulator* and *I Am Bread* with something equally kinetic but on a different plane when it comes to ambition, exploiting some refreshingly forward-looking technology.

We'll be focused on the future at Hype, a new **Edge** conference taking place in London on January 14, featuring guests such as David Braben, Steven Poole and Simon Parkin, along with games including *Dark Souls III* and *Crackdown 3*. There are more details elsewhere in this issue, but in the meantime we're following Avalanche's lead by inviting your questions for our keynote interview with Phil Harrison. Send your future-fixated topics of discussion to edge@futurenet.com, using the subject line 'PHQT'.

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#287

sections

CHRISTMAS 2015

EDGE

One night in Paris

With the competition at home, Sony delivered a very European debut conference at Paris Games Week

When announcing the future, there are far worse places to do it than La Défense, the dystopian glass business district of Paris that looks like 20 different visions of a real-world *Deus Ex*. Sony chose this spot, under the monolithic Grande Arche, to coincide with Paris Games Week, the Porte De Versailles trade fair that since 2010 has grown to rival Gamescom in size, and to which PlayStation attached its European conference for the first time this year.

Some sound reasoning sits behind the decision. E3 and Gamescom shuffled closer together than ever in 2015 – PGW's end-of-October slot offers more time for studios to polish code and assets, which can be presented to a public full of intent-to-purchase in closer proximity to the Christmas peak. Aside from pipeline pressures, it also leaves PlayStation standing alone – much as Microsoft did in August – with space to define the narrative on its own terms, without comparison or blow-by-blow points scoring.

And this, presumably, was the impetus behind the decision to focus on PlayStation VR, during the conference itself and particularly on the show floor. VR is a technology that can usefully and easily be labelled 'the future' – people have been doing that since the late '80s – and it gave Sony a vision to sell and an initiative to seize. This was a smart way of making the most of the isolation Paris Games Week offered, to concentrate on something that Sony's rivals in the console space don't have – a real, touch-it-and-wear-it-on-your-face VR experience, the intangible made plastic-handleable – which in turn explains the generous physical space given to a piece of isolating hardware that is difficult to publicly demonstrate.

Much-in-demand tickets on the densely packed show floor gave lucky consumers brief slots enveloped in on-rails shooter *Until Dawn: Rush Of Blood*, duck-for-cover action demo *The London Heist*, and firstperson arena battler *RIGS: Mechanized Combat League*. The conference, meanwhile, offered the kind of broad parade of semi-announcements in support of VR that we might remember from previous technologies – cameras, motion controls – that conspicuously *didn't* go on to define the future. There will be VR in *Tekken 7*, in *Gran Turismo*, in *DriveClub*, and in Media Molecule's hallucinatory sculpture-theatre puzzler, *Dreams*, among others. But this latter announcement in particular, let slip behind closed doors and playfully confirmed on Twitter, shows a real enthusiasm on the part of developers for this new technology. As much as there ever can be behind the corporate reassuring (yes, there will *definitely* be lots of games to play on your brittle crown of 3D fantasy) there is a discernible buzz of the converted from those who have tried VR and now want to create for it.

Did this grab at the future come at the expense of appeasing the bulk of PlayStation's hit-hungry base? There is some pressure here: the non-VR portion of Sony's show floor served as a reminder that PS4 has no big firstparty releases this side of Christmas. Substantial square metres were filled by a booming *Guitar Hero Live* speaker, a chunky booth of

> There's a buzz of the converted from those who have tried VR and now want to create for it

PlayStation VR and *Street Fighter V* are two of Sony's big hopes for the first half of 2015. The two aren't compatible, but *Tekken 7* will support the headset

Black Ops III multiplayer, and a TIE Fighter and AT-AT Walker courtesy of *Star Wars: Battlefront*. Sony's own games, including the absurdist walking simulator *What Remains Of Edith Finch* and *Bloodborne*'s *The Old Hunters* DLC, were squeezed into a single row of pods.

One way to ease the pressure would have been a glimpse at the action-heavy blockbusters planned for 2016 and beyond, but aside from an appropriately polished-looking dip into *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer – a marketing beat, not a showcase bombshell – this tactic was overlooked. There might be a territorial

Paris Games Week's bustling show floor confirmed that, no matter where the videogame industry's globe-trotting marketing roadshow may head, nothing will ever get a crowd so hyped up as the offer of free promotional tat

While the prominence afforded to *Star Wars Battlefront* exposed Sony's barren firstparty slate for the rest of 2015, the company teased its future lineup with *Gran Turismo Sport* and *Detroit: Become Human*. For the impatient, *Uncharted 4* is only a few months away

DÉLICE DE FRANCE
How Sony's French focus put PGW on the map

Sony's decision to host a press conference at Paris Games Week for the first time sparked predictable results. Attendance was up 13 per cent year on year, and there was a rise of more than 20 per cent in footfall at the Game Connection business conference that runs alongside the consumer event. Like Gamescom, Paris Games Week is an opportunity for local businesses. For the first time, part of the show floor was devoted to games made in France, with 20 studios showing their in-development wares to punters who came to the show to see big international names.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP **Rabbids VR Ride** is an on-rails VR experience starring what the French call Les Lapins Crétins (literally, The Silly Rabbits); the crowds pack in for the fifth annual eSports World Cup; Master Chief swaps wetwork for fretwork

dimension here; much of PlayStation's blockbuster stable is in the hands of SCEA, whose own Las Vegas showcase in December needs its own slate of whoop-able announcements.

And so, aside from the big VR push, we were left with a conference that felt resolutely, defiantly European in character, though it was hard to tell if that was by accident or design. The regular thunder and blow of E3, all bass-throbbing PA systems and bullet-flare light shows, was replaced with a more esoteric slate starring titles focused on open-world shamaning, 3D modelling, and Asimovian ethics and roboticism.

Hearing the crowd respond to Michel Ancel's on-stage presentation of the lush mysticism of *Wild* was to remember that France was the one country in the world to fully embrace David Lynch's Dune. *Wild* is an earthy, HUD-free game of exploration set in a colossal open world, which can be variously galloped, slithered and flown over when you adopt the bodies of various possessable animals. Ancel's new studio, Wild Sheep, stressed in presentations that the game is about discovery as much as objectives – a *No Man's Sky* for enthusiastic campers.

Media Molecule's *Dreams* was more slippery to grasp still, to the extent that an

> Dreams is a special kind of impressive: the technology and the potential it unlocks are astounding

onstage gameplay presentation couldn't even clarify the matter of whether the activities it offers can accurately be described as 'gameplay' at all. As with *LittleBigPlanet*, the Guildford studio is clearly driven as much by the idea of making as it is playing – *Dreams* is part toolbox for making games and levels, all woven together via links, with sculpting, animation, music and game logic tools available for editing. The package builds on the same basic foundations as *LBP* – building, sharing, playing – with the craft-and-stickers motif switched for a claymation surrealism. It's a special kind of impressive: the technology and the potential it unlocks are astounding, even though it's hard to imagine a popularist rush on carving pandas. In other words, it's very boutique, very Paris, and very PlayStation. (We take a closer look at the game on p46.)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the reveal of Quantic Dream's new game was even more Paris, despite being named after another city entirely. *Detroit: Become Human* resurrects the android star of the studio's pre-*Beyond* tech demo, Kara, and places her at the centre of a story of self-determination and consciousness in the faded American motor city. David Cage, who said the word "emotion" so many times during the announcement it was surely the result of some kind of bet, has a knack for striking staging, if not a track record of execution, and the game's combination of progressive technology and human endeavour make *Detroit* a charged and appropriate setting. It consolidated the feeling of the evening: not quite a local conference for local people, but a showcase devoted to nuance, sophistication and (yes, David) emotion that it's hard to imagine happening elsewhere.

Aside from this central trio, the biggest announcements came from Japan. *Tekken 7* and *Street Fighter V* brought a playful onstage collaboration between executive drinking pals Katsuhiro Harada of Bandai Namco and Yoshinori Ono of Capcom. It was contrived fun between real friends that felt like a nostalgic holdout from an earlier era, which could equally be said of the games they came to represent. That said, the evening's other Japanese reveal served as a reminder of the power that still lies in PlayStation's home nation. *Gran Turismo Sport* might be just the regular engine-revving foreplay for the next full instalment of Polyphony Digital's immaculate racing series, but it remains a standard bearer for Sony, a display of tech muscle and development resource. That PlayStation's European chief Jim Ryan remained onstage to interview series director Kazunori Yamauchi was a respectful salute to this standing.

Some highlights from Sony's conference (clockwise from top left): Guerrilla Cambridge's competitive VR shooter *RIGS: Mechanized Combat League*; Media Molecule's typically playful toybox *Dreams*; *No Man's Sky*, which now has a June release date that everyone is absolutely, definitely certain Hello Games is going to hit, so relax; on-rails PSVR shooter *Until Dawn: Rush Of Blood*; Bandai Namco's *Tekken 7*, confirmed at the show for PS4 and PSVR; and Michel Ancel's open-world adventure *Wild*

Finally, there was *No Man's Sky*, a game whose development schedule has long threatened to expand indefinitely like the universe it's designed to procedurally create. The reveal of a release date – June 2016 – not only puts a stop to that line of speculation, but in so doing puts a cap on the number of onstage showings left for a title that has cleverly garnered a momentum of mystique from leapfrogging from one conference to the next. We might see a farewell appearance at next year's E3; if not, this was a fitting send-off, Rutger Hauer delivering a wide-eyed voiceover bookended by two halves of his most famous line in Blade Runner.

It seems, then, that Paris helped define the tone of the PlayStation conference. But once the noise of that conference was over, the show itself struggled for much

character at all. Attendance this year was 307,000 – not far off Gamescom's 375,000, although Paris feels smaller, the main stands clustered in a single hall (a kid-focused sideshow takes place in an adjacent one), which is dwarfed by the wearying volume of the Koelnmesse.

Maybe more volume would help give Paris Games Week room to breathe. Even more so than Cologne's jammed corridors and shoulder-to-shoulder processions, Paris Games Week was a dense hustle of hungry crowds, reaching for freebies thrown from booming booth-corner presentation stages, queueing restlessly under blockbuster logos, and oozing like a silted river around the Porte De Versailles. Sony gave away helium-filled balloons printed with PlayStation's

famous symbols throughout the week; by the show's end there was a small settlement of them covering the hall ceiling, and it was hard not to be envious of the room up there.

So Paris Games Week might feel like a little show made far bigger by the appearance of Sony, rather than a sizeable one just waiting for the proper recognition, but the platform holder will likely be back next year. The show works in too many ways, slotting neatly into marketing calendars, development timelines and retail schedules, and giving not just PlayStation but SCEE in particular the kind of elbow room not found on the show floor to make its mark. This first run might not have been Sony's loudest triumph, but there were at least no noisy neighbours to drown it out. ■

Illuminating minds

How a small Italian studio is tackling the complex issue of mental health with The Town Of Light

Florence-based indie studio IKA.it has taken on the task of raising awareness about mental illness with its firstperson psychological thriller *The Town Of Light*. While the setting, the Volterra Psychiatric Hospital, will prove familiar to fans of the asylum-rich horror genre, this game aims to be much more than another series of jump scares in dilapidated corridors. Retracing one girl's time in the institution after her internment in 1942, the only threats you'll face come from within, but they're no less dangerous for that. Here, the game's screenwriter, art director and technical director, **Luca Dalcò**, discusses the thinking behind the project, and how IKA.it is dealing with a sensitive topic in a medium so often focused on entertaining.

What inspired the game?
Like many others, I've had the unlucky experience of seeing people near me fall into the dark void of desperation. I also experienced really hard times in my own life where I've been exposed to the suffering that psychiatric disease involves.

What is it about this medium that makes it suitable for conveying what you want to say about mental illness?
A videogame, like a painting, book, song or movie, is a way to express something you have inside of you. As a tool [for expression], videogames are less direct than other media, because they require longer work and coordination with a team of people, but they're no less effective in narrating a pain that doesn't disappear easily — something that you carry with you for the rest of your life. Videogames are mature enough to start

tackling narratives that are a bit more complex than what we used to see in the past. The technology allows us to tell stories in a really different way than other mediums. I don't believe a videogame is necessarily better than a movie, but it offers a more immersive experience that better suits what we wanted to do.

Mental illness is a delicate subject – were you worried about handling the topic with enough sensitivity?
We read a lot of books – both novels and research by people who used to work in those asylums around Italy. The game is set in a psychiatric hospital in Volterra, but our research was broader. On top of that, we spoke with people who were involved in some capacity and who have indirect access to stories and events [from that time]. Volterra is a small place, but even though the town only has about 6,000 inhabitants, at one point the hospital hosted some 5,000 patients. When you walk through the street today almost everyone living there is connected directly or indirectly to the story we're telling.

"It's fascinating to see how the mental health institutions tried to cope with a very primitive science"

Did anything you discover in the course of your research surprise you?
Certainly. It's fascinating to see and understand how the mental health institutions tried to cope with a very primitive science and the lack of personnel available — sometimes there were only five nurses per 200 patients.

What do your interviewees make of the game when they see it in action?
So far, everyone we've shown it to likes

Luca Dalcò, art and technical director, and screenwriter

LKA * it

the idea, since our game helps to remember the people who were forgotten in those places even before they died.

You've based your setting on a real place – how accurate is your take?
The real-life structure consists of more than 20 pavilions, some of them used today by Volterra's [general] hospital. We've recreated three of the biggest ones, which encompass a total of 7,000 square metres. The structure is the same as today, but for gameplay reasons we've added furniture and machines that are obviously not there any more.

But the protagonist is an amalgam of real stories and your own narrative?
Yes. Renee represents one of the many girls who were unable to adapt to a difficult world, one that was fast heading towards WWII and at the same time sending 16-year-old girls to psychiatric hospitals because they were 'a danger to themselves and others'. We constantly tried to imagine what Renee would feel and built up her story in a hugely detailed way, as if she really did exist. We've produced hundreds of pages and drafts that show how she looks and how she acts. We've a real affection for Renee now – it's like she's become a real person during development.

Ultimately, what do you hope players will get out of The Town Of Light?
Our aim is for people to empathise with Renee and reflect on how mental illness is one of the most common illnesses. At varying levels, mental illness affects a large percentage of the world's population, but it's something that's difficult [to talk about] and too often treated without respect. Our aim is to make players more aware. ∎
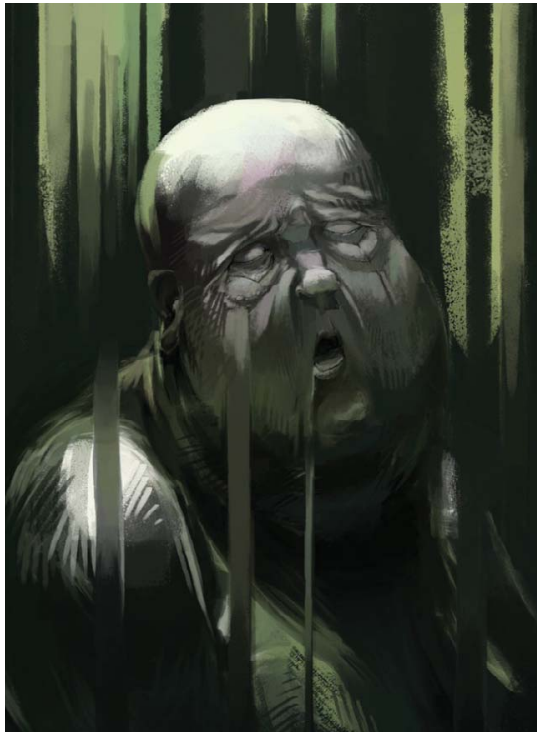
You'll be subjected to hallucinations (above) in which other characters dwell, while Renee's past is revealed partly through sepia-tinted animations (below)

The Town Of Light is in development for PC, with Oculus Rift support, but IKA.it hasn't ruled out other fomats for the future

THOUGHT PROCESS
The mindset behind entering an unwell mindset in games

Dalcò and co have been careful not to position mental illness as an intangible affliction. "[Italian psychiatrist] Vittorino Andreoli explains very well that mental illness is not a matter of 'quality', but of 'quantity'," Dalcò says. "He means that all the defence mechanisms that those affected by this kind of illness use against the discomfort it causes are the same – but the severity of that discomfort makes the difference between being ill or not. Anxiety and fear are good reactions that help us to make us aware of danger. But when the intensity of those reactions reach excessive levels, they become a pathology."

The future of interactive entertainment – live

Join us for a new conference where we'll be talking to the creators of some of 2016's most keenly anticipated games

January 14 in London will mark the debut for Hype, a new videogame conference from the creators of **Edge**. At the Ham Yard Hotel in W1, magazine contributors will join game creators on stage to map out a course for the future of interactive entertainment. The conference is aimed at both game creators and enthusiasts, and tickets are available to buy online now (www.hypeevent.co.uk).

Industry pioneer Phil Harrison will be joining us for our keynote interview session, in which the former PlayStation and Xbox man will be tackling topics that are changing the rules for interaction, including AR, VR and new user interfaces.

We'll also be talking to the creators of some of 2016's most innovative games, such as Reagent Games' cloud-processing-enhanced *Crackdown 3*, with live demos presented on stage, along with audience Q&A opportunities.

Among those taking part in discussions and interviews will be **Edge** writers Nathan Brown, Simon Parkin, Steven Poole and Keza MacDonald, while another **Edge** contributor, Mark Brown, will be presenting a live instalment of his renowned YouTube series Game Maker's Toolkit. In a special The Making Of… slot, Frontier Developments' David Braben will tell the story behind *Elite: Dangerous*, while a dedicated indie session features UK industry luminaries Simon Byron, Paul Kilduff-Taylor, Dan Marshall and Caspian Prince.

The event, which is presented in association with Bandai Namco Entertainment UK, will also give attendees the opportunity to play *Dark Souls III*. For more info, including updates on further features, guests and game demo sessions, head to the Hype website. ∎

Hype runs from 9:30am to 5:45pm, and will be followed by an invitation-only companion event that will see the Edge Awards presented on stage for the first time since their inception nearly 20 years ago

Ticket booking details and event updates
hypeevent.co.uk
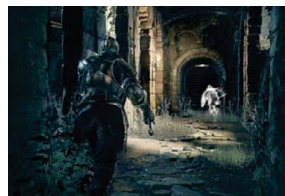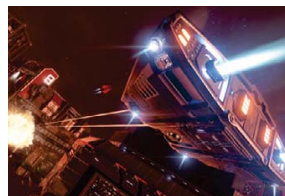
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT **Phil Harrison is headlining in Hype's keynote interview slot; David Braben will discuss the making of *Elite: Dangerous*; Dan Marshall (Size Five Games); Simon Parkin (Death By Video Game); Keza MacDonald (Kotaku UK); Reagent's *Crackdown 3*; Paul Kilduff-Taylor (Mode 7); Mark Brown (Game Maker's Toolkit). Bandai Namco's *Dark Souls III* (centre) will be playable at the event**

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The Tomorrow Children is also drawing from another intimidating world: "The influence of *Dark Souls* was quite strong," Cuthbert explains. "I found their method of showing a world 'populated' asynchronously by other players refreshing"

SUPERMARIONATION

PixelJunk studio Q-Games is once again tugging on different strings to the mainstream

The otherworldly stylings of *The Tomorrow Children*, the forthcoming project by the Tokyo-based Q-Games, was inspired by traditional Czech puppets and theatre shows. It's a route that, combined with a powerful voxel-based engine, lends the game an uncommonly tactile aesthetic, but also meshes perfectly with the Marxism-esque social systems that govern this world's inhabitants.

"Our art team actually went to Prague to research the ways the puppets are made," Q-Games founder **Dylan Cuthbert** tells us. "The aesthetic is not so much

'tin toy', which would imply a '40s or '50s leaning, but a metal, stone, wood – and a little plastic – style, which gives [the game] a much more 1960s feel."

The Tomorrow Children's architecture, meanwhile, is based on the Brutalist school. "It's quite heavy structures of concrete, stone and metal, which really gives a Soviet Iron Curtain feel to everything," Cuthbert says. "The Czech Republic was annexed by Russia in the late '60s, so this all mixes together to create a strong Eastern European vibe, which we feel is unique in gaming."

Another rarity is how realistic every material appears to be. The result is that *The Tomorrow Children* looks like a window into a physical world of marionettes cut loose from their strings and imbued with charming life. Q-Games has long been relentlessly courageous in its embracing of experimental ideas and projects, and *The Tomorrow Children* feels like something of an apogee for its approach.

"For us, every game is a pinnacle, since we never take our foot off the pedal when we're making a game," Cuthbert says.

"Every one we make has to be the best of its class in some way, or at least introduce a new type of gameplay to the table. This is definitely our most ambitious project in scope, though, and our next game will be our most ambitious in some other way too, I'm sure. We always try to find something novel or ingenious and lock onto that. It's not always the most financially successful path, but it is definitely the most interesting and exciting one."

The Tomorrow Children is scheduled for release on PS4 before the end of 2015. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"Sixty percent of their consumers are female. There are **more opportunities now** than we've ever had before."

Bobby Kotick explains why Activision dropped $5.9 billion on *Candy Crush* maker King. Perhaps it had nothing to do with profit margins?

"He suggested that it might be nice if, at the end of *GoldenEye*, **you got to shake hands** with all your enemies in the hospital."

GoldenEye 007 director **Martin Hollis** reveals Shigeru Miyamoto's squeamish side

"Our goal is to increase the number of My Nintendo members. It would be good if we reached **100 or 200 million.**"

Fighting words from Nintendo president **Tatsumi Kimishima**. And probably a tad optimistic

"For a lot of companies, remakes are a way to drive revenue… **We don't do that here.** I don't think that's ever been in our culture."

EA COO **Peter Moore** dreams up a world without annual iterations of *FIFA, Madden* et al

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

Game *Galaga Assault*
Manufacturer Bandai Namco

Galaga's swirling waves of insectoid enemies are preparing to make another run at players in a new version of the 34-year-old *Galaxian* sequel. *Galaga Assault* is another retro-focused collaboration between Bandai Namco and *Big Buck* creator Raw Thrills following 2013's *Pac-Man Chomp Mania*. Like that game, *Assault* is a ticket redemption cabinet, handing out paper rewards in exchange for points.

The gaudy green-and-purple cab sticks with a classic upright design and is built around a 1080p, portrait-oriented 42-inch LCD screen, itself surrounded by a colourful LED bezel. This modern exterior encases an updated, shortform take on the 1981 version that splits each session into two stages. The first stage pits you against 100 enemies, which you can destroy or avoid in standard fashion, but survive this and you'll be warped to a mothership round to fight the boss, the destruction of which nets you the game's jackpot.

There are other new features, too. The cabinet makes use of QR scanning – something other Raw Thrills cabinets use to track high scores – and there will be the option to buy more ships if your long-dormant piloting skills don't come back to you straight away. The cabinet can also be switched to 'Amusement Mode', presumably for those who have no interest in gathering up piles of tickets and trading them in for novelty pencil erasers and chewy sweets. The game doesn't have an official release date right now, but expect more details to emerge at IAAPA 2015.

ALBION UNVEILED

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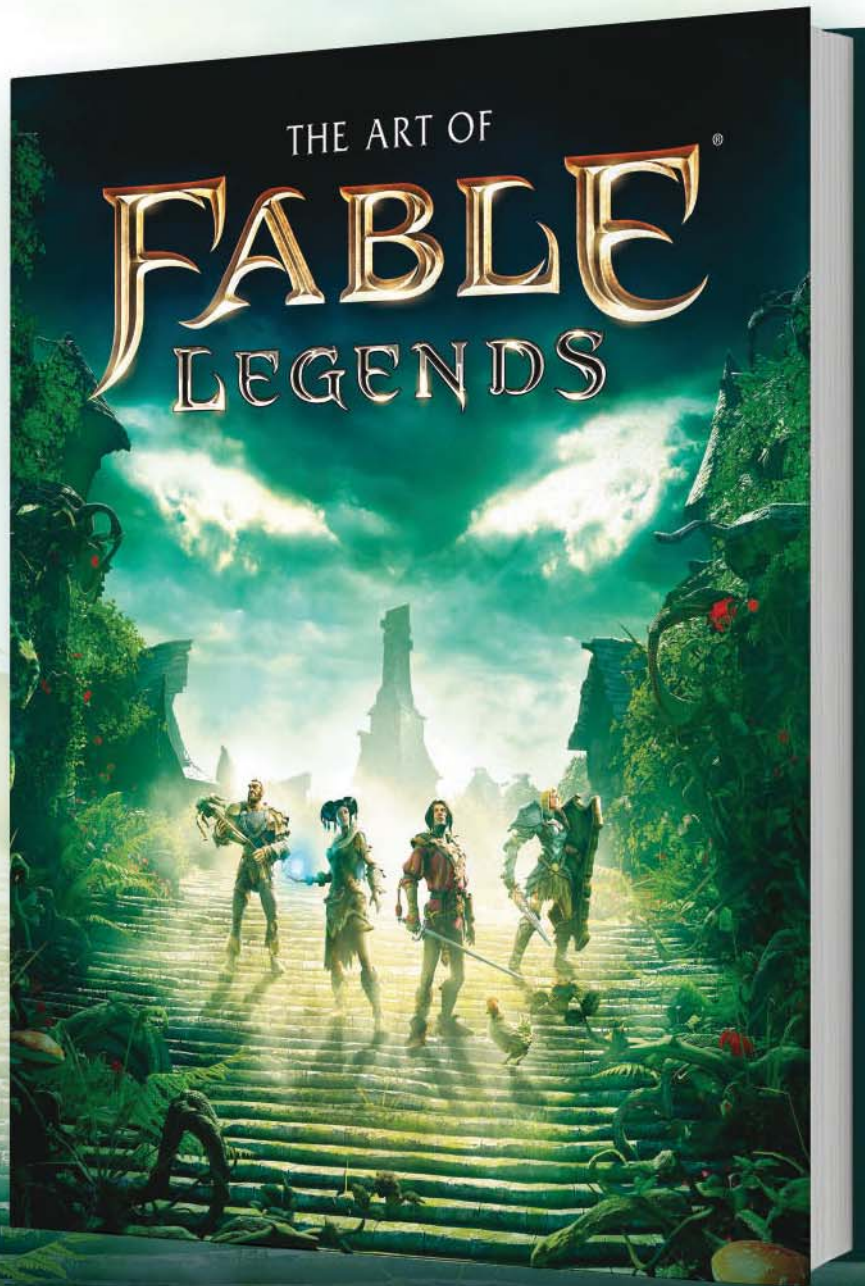
Featuring interviews with Lionhead Studios and extensive high-quality concept art for each of the heroes, villains, creatures and locations in the game, and much, much more!

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My Favourite Game
Danny Wallace

The comedian and writer on using games as a mental reboot, script tinkering for assassins, and getting to grips with a ZX81

After a spell doing odd jobs around the Sega Power office in 1992, the 16-year-old **Danny Wallace** found himself juggling GCSEs with game reviews. That early exposure to multitasking seems to have provided a sturdy foundation on which to build a varied career – he's since tackled writing, directing, presenting and, of course, voice acting in the *Assassin's Creed* series and *Thomas Was Alone*. With that in mind, we ask whether he'd like games to feature more heavily on his CV.

You've worked at both ends of the videogame budget spectrum – how different were those experiences?
Yes, I have a very De Niro approach to videogames: a blockbuster, then an indie. With Mike [Bithell], we get together, talk, then do it. With Ubisoft, it's a much more involved process, since they get me writing and consulting too. I did quite a bit of work on *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* this year on other characters too, and when it comes to my character, Shaun Hastings, they let me mess around a lot and improvise. With Mike, it's voice only, and with Ubisoft it's the whole wearing-a-helmet-cam and drawing dots on your face [thing], but the core of it is the same.

Do you have a preference when it comes to the styles of working?
No, they're both great fun. With *Thomas Was Alone*, Mike's first game, it was just a case of trying not to ruin things. The design, the gameplay, the thoughtfulness and the music all made it quite special. My job was to try to pull that all together without being overbearing.

GOLDEN BOY
Wallace became a BBC producer in his early 20s, overseeing award-winning projects such as Dead Ringers and The Mighty Boosh before deciding that working in an office was no longer for him. After that, he challenged Dave Gorman to find 54 other Dave Gormans, started an accidental cult, founded his own micronation and spent six months saying yes to the kind of things he would normally decline. His debut novel, Charlotte Street, was published in 2012, and his second, Who Is Tom Ditto?, arrived last year. In October, Wallace presented the 33rd Golden Joystick Awards at London's IndigO2.

Do you see your videogame voice work as a side project, or is it a part of your career that you'd like to expand upon?
I find it fun, but I've never had a career plan. My whole thing is: go where the fun is, but crucially, try to do the fun well so it might lead to more fun somewhere down the line. It's nice to have different routes you can go down from time to time. I'd be up for more games work, but it's up to other people to ask me.

Going back, what's your earliest gaming memory?
Sitting in my dad's office with the ZX81 our neighbour gave us when they upgraded to a Spectrum. My parents were downstairs and I got really freaked out because the game started playing itself. I assumed a ghost was playing *Space Invaders*, when in fact it was on demo mode.

And how about the first game that really grabbed you?
We got a BBC Model B and I remember playing *Chuckie Egg* and realising how much fun it was. Then I saved up and bought *The Way Of The Exploding Fist* for about £1.50 from Woolworths. But it wasn't until the Mega Drive that I got fully involved – obsessed, even. I'd devour the magazines, save up for whatever I could, and inveigled my way into Sega Power as a teenager. That was insane. Now I was getting free games and money to write about them. It was my golden ticket to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory.

> "I got freaked out because the game started playing itself. I assumed a ghost was playing Space Invaders"

What kind of player are you now?
I like multiplayer. I like being outwitted by actual people, and trying to outwit [others]. The earlier *Call Of Duty* games were great for that.

Do you match wits much now?
It's part of my writing process sometimes. You hit a wall, or you can't think of a better line… so you switch on the PS4, play for 20 minutes and it frees something up in your brain.

We talk to a lot of comics for MFG – is there a natural overlap between comedy and games?
Comics tend to work at night and wake up tired, so those guys have more of their day free. My friends list, because of my job, tends to have a lot of comics and comedy writers on it. The fact you can talk to your mates while playing leads to some fun afternoons, but I tend to know comics who are quite disciplined and have other responsibilities. Playing games reminds everybody of being in their 20s, and being able to spend all day on *Driver*.

So which game would you choose to spend all day playing if you could?
Probably multiplayer *GoldenEye* on the N64. I lost a summer to it and bonded with countless people over it. It was one of those games you became insanely good at. You'd play it at 10am, 6pm, 2am – whenever. It was never *not* fun. That's the mark of a good game. ■

EDGE

Wallace doesn't take many games with him on the road, preferring to focus on the event at hand. "I might play the odd iPad game, but train travel spells movies my wife doesn't want to watch. Anything with Jason Statham in, basically"

WEBSITE
Gustavo Viselner
www.bit.ly/GustavoPixel
Tel Aviv-based illustrator and videogame artist Gustavo Viselner is gradually working his way through the movies of the latter 20th century and turning them into works of pixel art. Among the films to undergo the treatment are Back To The Future, Star Wars, Aliens and The Princess Bride. There are more modern flicks represented, too, such as Inglourious Basterds and Watchmen. But while each looks great in its own right, the real pleasure is in imagining the games they might have been. Most have the air of '90s point-and-click adventures, though Back To The Future II looks like an Amiga platformer. Viselner has also tried his hand at a music video for ten-piece fusion collective Lucille Crew, which plays out as a 16bit arcade game complete with cannabis pickups and condom lives.

VIDEO
Metroid: The Sky Calls
www.bit.ly/Mskycalls
The latest project in nonprofit studio Rainfall Films' Fantasy Filmmaking series, Metroid: The Sky Calls is an atmospheric 12-minute short. Nerdist news host Jessica Chobot and Halo 5 actor America Young share the role of Aran (the latter handling stunt work), as the bounty hunter investigates a mysterious signal originating beneath a planet's surface. Director Sam Balcomb styles the short on the sci-fi movies that inspired Metroid, with Aliens his most prominent influence. Filmed using VHS transfers and custom-scanned 16mm stock, The Sky Calls has a grainy look that recalls those '80s tastemakers brilliantly.

WEB GAME
TheShpufa
www.bit.ly/InfinInc
Two-person indie TheShpufa has brought into being a charming take on cloning puzzle games. Infinity Inc casts you as a squat collection of pixels in a suit and tie stuck in a laboratory. Deadly laser beams, poisonous gas vents and other hazards bar the way, but the game's salaryman protagonist can make use of an experimental Nuclear Cloning Gun in order to operate pressure switches, explore multiple routes at once and even sacrifice copies of himself in the name of shorting traps. Later on you'll face doors that require a minimum number of clones to unlock, and macabre ones that ask you kill off dead weight with the self-destruct button. Infinity Inc is amusingly dark (and surprisingly gory), and its puzzles are well constructed. It might not be a unique idea, but it's a great reproduction.
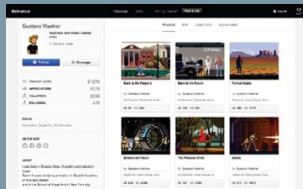
THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

CONSOLE
Retro Freak
www.bit.ly/retrofreakconsole
Emulation's great and all, but the **Edge** office is packed to the rafters with vintage cartridges that, in this ship-now, patch-later, download-code era, are somehow reassuring. But what to play them on? Enter Cyber Gadget's Retro Freak, not much of a looker, but capable of running cartridges built for 11 legacy console systems, from Famicom to PC Engine. With an extra adaptor, it supports old controllers, too. And if you're terrified of wrecking that precious imported copy of Final Fight Guy, you can dump ROM files onto an SD card and put your carts back into storage. Not bad.

continue

Arkham Right?
Warner gets its Batman PC patch out the door…

Ad blockers anon
Your business is losing money because people want everything for free? Welcome to 1998

Elite Dangerous
The wallet-busting new Xbox One Elite pad is worth every penny

Xenoblade coverup
No more uncomfortably threadbare togs for kids

quit

Darkest Knight
…then offers refunds when it's still buggy

Konami closed
Kojima Productions LA is gone. Do you actually enjoy appearing here every month, Konami?

Hopes crashed
If only the Xbox One dashboard beta was so finely engineered

Truth bomb
Fallout 4 skins in Forza? The hype is getting silly

TWEETS
It was striking at Indiecade how few people had heard of recent indie games – even ones by devs they love, or that got lots of press.
Tom Francis @Pentadact
Developer, Suspicious Developments

Partner's debit card got flagged for fraud. The (US) culprits went for 4 pizzas and a Steam purchasing binge. Sounds like a party!
Alex Evans @mmalex
Director, Media Molecule

I really hope in the new World Of Warcraft movie the first thing our hero needs to do is go kill ten rats.
Ron Gilbert @grumpygamer
Creator, The Secret Of Monkey Island

Major milestone: putting away Halloween decorations, found I had enough skulls to justify a separate box labeled "skulls."
Tim Schafer @TimOfLegend
Founder, Double Fine

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DISPATCHES
CHRISTMAS

Issue 286

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a New Nintendo 3DS XL, supplied by the Nintendo UK store

Want that old thing back

I recently read through your latest special edition, The 100 Greatest Games. Even though I didn't agree with your list (each to their own), I was intrigued by one of the criteria you insisted on for a game to make your list — that the game still needed to be playable today.

Growing up, my favourite game was *GoldenEye* on the N64. I dread to think of the time I spent playing it in singleplayer and the fun we had playing multiplayer whenever we could. But would I play it today and last more than five minutes before I realised I hated the controller, the nostalgia wore off, and I found myself reaching for the off button?

So, thinking hard about games I would still play today, *Halo 3* came out on top of my list, because even today the gameplay, story, music and atmosphere are all still as enjoyable as they were when it was first released. I have only one issue with the game now, and as time goes by I suspect it will only get worse, and that is that graphically it doesn't hold up to today's standards. When *Halo 4* came out and surpassed *Halo 3*'s graphics, it didn't make *Halo 3* any worse. You expect a sequel to be better — it's a natural evolution, and it almost blinds us to the change. It wasn't until *The Master Chief Collection* was released, and I played through the updated *Halo* and *Halo 2*, that I noticed that *Halo 3*'s graphics suddenly looked dated in comparison. Johnson had suddenly gone from being a realistic (and ill-tempered) character to a blocky, robotic figure.

This is the issue with old games. If you're trying to make a game look as good as the hardware allows, sooner or later it's going to be surpassed, and even our fondest memories of that game can't cover it up. And the longer you leave it, the more dated it becomes.

> "Publishers need to get a good return on their investment, but is any game truly worth £90?"

It would be interesting to see which of the games on your list would still be there in five to ten years' time. Games like *Super Mario World* or the *The Wind Waker* never tried to be the most realistic-looking games, and funnily enough they've both aged considerably well because of it. Does making a game look as realistic as possible shorten its life expectancy in the history of games?
Daniel Morris

Clearly yes, though it's more framerate than raw pixel count behind *GoldenEye*'s rather graceless ageing process. Still, if we follow that logic, one day even *Halo 5*'s probably going to look awful too. So that's something to look forward to — as is your New Nintendo 3DS XL.

Mo' money...

DLC started in the PC gaming world when publishers thought of a cool new thing they wanted to share with the people who had purchased their games, as a way of saying thank you to the fanbase. At first it was free and very much tied into the mod community. But as the cost of creating games increased (and let's not shy away from the spiralling costs of game development), some bright sparks decided to start charging for 'more'. There were some missteps, to be sure, like the *Oblivion* horse armour debacle.

Call Of Duty soon followed, and to begin with these extra multiplayer bundles felt innovative and good value. However, as the iterations went on it seemed less innovative and more like the new normal.

Perhaps *Destiny* is the best example of how DLC has gotten out of control. It's very hard to look at its first year as anything other than a year-long beta where I had the privilege to pay for the game and an annual pass — that's more than £60 to pay for what turned out to be a rather empty game. It simply wasn't worth the money. While

www.facebook.com/
edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with
fellow **Edge** readers

The Taken King seems to have fixed all the problems, of course Bungie want me to pay more money, but quite frankly I feel that they owe me *The Taken King* for putting my faith in them in year one rather than charge me for it, so I'm not playing it any more.

But they are by no means the worst perpetrators. News has come out that *Star Wars: Battlefront* is to cost double the retail price if you want the ultimate DLC pass. How much of this is me paying for stuff that's already on the disc? While I can absolutely appreciate that publishers need to get a good return on their investment, is any game truly worth £90? That's less of a fun hobby and more the cost of commuting in London each month!
Jem Duducu

...Mo' problems

I love games. It all started playing *Commander Keen* when I was a kid on my dad's PC, to *Doom*, and *Metal Gear Solid* blowing me away at 2am when I should have been sleeping but was fighting Psycho Mantis instead. It's a passion I am trying to share with my son, with *Minecraft*, *Mario* and the *Lego* games.

I find them much better to unwind with than films or a TV series, and a consistent stream of (probably) great games is coming soon — *Fallout 4*, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, *Rainbow Six Siege*, *The Witness*, *Black Ops 3*. However, I'm finding myself more and more frustrated, and reluctant to pay up for them.

Last night I took a breather from *The Talos Principle* to play *The Witcher III* — 'The Last Wish' quest — but it's bugged, a problem with a boat going in the wrong direction and getting stuck. I move on to do a main story mission and it kills that entire side-quest. It's not the end of the world, but yet another bug, and still frustrating.

I played through *Halo 5*, got to one of the last checkpoints, and my AI team just stopped, refusing to move. Frustrating. *Soma*, which I loved and thought was brilliant, kept crashing initially. Frustrating.

Assassin's Creed Unity — which issue do I begin with? This year was the first since 2007 that I didn't get a copy of the newest iteration of *Assassin's Creed* on release day.

I think I'm getting worried that maybe that fire burning in me for about 25 years is going out. Or maybe I'm just getting more cautious, fed up of paying for what sometimes feels like an unfinished product. Is it just me?
Andy Warden

Dead wrong

That's it. I'm out. I have just found out, too late, that my *Black Ops III* preorder is not going to come with the bonuses I was promised, because they were exclusive to a certain retailer — the wrong retailer — but Activision, the publisher, somehow did not communicate it properly.

The bonus in question was a single multiplayer map, Nuketown, that is weirdly popular in Treyarch's *COD* games. I hate it, personally, but many others disagree — to such an extent that I was able to claw back half the cost of *Black Ops II* by selling my Nuketown code on eBay. But not this time, because I ordered from Amazon instead of Game. Never again.

To be fair, I said that last time, when I was faced with almost the exact same thing with another Activision preorder, this time for some extra weapons in *Destiny: The Taken King*. I can accept the preorder bonuses and the season passes, to a point. All I ask in return is that publishers fulfil their minimum obligation: delivering the rewards they are actually offering. Doesn't seem that much to ask, does it?
Andrew Dyson

Here we have three different parts of the same problem, all especially relevant at the busiest game-buying season of the year. We are being asked for more money than ever, earlier than ever, and what we get in return very often doesn't work as promised or, at worst, doesn't even exist. Merry Christmas!

Unbelievable

What does dialogue mean in games? Surely what it means in every other medium: an exchange of sentences, a conversation, between two or more people. But what does the dialogue actually mean both to the story and gameplay? Even the most crucial story dialogue between our character and other NPCs happens automatically. We watch them speak, utter the sentences, forming dialogues that set up scenes. But we're not the ones uttering the dialogue. Even in story-driven, your-choices-matter games, dialogue is still automatic, even if we choose what the character will say.

I am working on a voice-controlled game that aims to test that. The player is one of the main protagonists of the story and they communicate with the second protagonist, who is an NPC. In the game you are located in a control room, in an underground facility, now under quarantine lockdown after an accident caused outbreaks of violent behaviour among most of the personnel. Watching the computer monitor, your objective is to help the NPC, a scientist, get to safety by guiding him with voice commands.

This is what I call the gameplay dialogue, the dictation of a small string of words that guide the NPC. But there is also what I call story dialogue, where the player utters the sentence of the story's script. They are having a conversation with the scientist. They don't watch the dialogue unfold; they are the ones unfolding it.

How much can we embody a character when we are literally speaking their minds? How much can we care about an NPC if we are talking to them? How can we tell a story via voice recognition? This is what my game aims to find out.
Valentina Chrysostomou

Now, see, what you've done here is place a preview of your own game in **Edge** by disguising it as a letter. Which is pretty cunning. We'll let you off this once. ∎

STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

The mind is a machine for reducing uncertainty. At least, so goes one intriguing theory in modern cognitive psychology. Human perception is not a passive business of receiving sense data from the eyes, ears and so forth. Instead, there is a storm of noisy, ambiguous, uncertain signals, from which the brain's unconscious processing must work very hard to infer even the existence of a table in front of me.

The human brain, on this theory, is constantly performing an unconscious form of logical reasoning called "abduction". Abduction reasons backwards, from ambiguous evidence to a hypothesised cause. I unconsciously reason that the noisy data of my visual field is the kind of pattern that would be caused if a table were in front of me. Therefore I decide that I am perceiving a table. Abduction is a kind of speculative reverse engineering. It is the kind of reasoning we consciously use when, as Lara Croft, we hypothesise that this mechanism must be driven by that cog, which in turn must be activated by that switch over there.

The trouble is that abduction is highly unreliable. The cause I hypothesise for my sensorium might just be wrong. (That cog might be a red herring.) And this, on the theory, is what goes wrong when people have hallucinations, seeing or hearing things that aren't there. It's not that something has gone wrong with their ordinary perception; the system is working as it normally does, only more so — trying too hard to make sense of the data, and making mistakes in its abduction. But these mistakes at least reduce uncertainty about what is out there. Even psychotic delusions, such as that the TV is talking to you personally, can be thought of in the same way. Uncertainty in everyday life can be terribly stressful. A delusion resolves uncertainty and can thus be of tremendous comfort to the person who holds it — in just the same way as a religious faith can.

Perhaps, then, videogames are a virtual allegory of our minds' stumbling progress

Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

If you are never stuck, you can never have an "Aha!" moment, which is one of the great joys of the medium

through the world. The gameworld is reality; the player is mind. The videogame recreates and exercises the cognitive systems of abduction-from-data in a more pleasurably manageable way. It replaces the real world with a simulated world in which the rhythms of uncertainty and satisfaction are more responsive to the player's agency. And when uncertainty is resolved, the player can know she is objectively correct, as she rarely can in the real world, because of the ping of a trophy, the discovery of a desired object, the opening of a new vista. Hallucinations and delusions are impossible — or, rather, the

videogame is a sort of benign, all-encompassing delusion itself.

If a videogame is about creating uncertainty and giving the player the tools to resolve it, then it would follow that it fails when there is either too little uncertainty or too much, or when the uncertainty is in the wrong place altogether. This is one way of thinking, for example, about the modern fashion for excessive handholding and obtrusive hinting in videogames, lest the player get stuck. Being stuck — in a state of uncertainty that one is attempting to resolve — is a necessary part of the game's pleasure, as long as the player trusts the system to furnish a way out. If you are never stuck, you can never have an "Aha!" moment, which is one of the great joys of the medium.

Misplaced uncertainty, meanwhile, has marred my recent co-op playthroughs of *LittleBigPlanet 3* and *Lara Croft: The Temple Of Osiris*. My gaming partner and I are not the stupidest guys on the planet, but we must have spent nearly as many hours in those games wondering where the hell to go next as we did actually playing the levels. Both *LBP3* and *Lara* have big hub levels where you are forced into mystifying and confusing exploration just to discover the next playable area. That's the kind of uncertainty that ejects the player from the comforting delusion of living in a rational universe.

Still, we had fun, as we always do. Indeed, the model I am here proposing — of videogames as allegories of mind versus reality — offers a way to think about the joy of cooperative play as well. In this picture, playing co-op implies a second personality inside one's head, but this delusion (as it is not in schizophrenia or psychosis) is benign and productive. Playing cooperatively socialises the process of logical abduction, and doubles the satisfaction of resolving uncertainty. In art as in love, two people become one mind against the system.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

IAN BOGOST

Difficulty Switch

Hard game criticism

While it's tough to pick from among the reasons the TurboGrafx-16 is the best videogame console ever made, here's my favorite: its associated TurboExpress handheld system.

If you've never heard of the NEC TurboGrafx, it's either because you're too young (it was first released in Japan in 1987 and in North America in 1989), or you live in Europe (the system's 1990 release on the continent was limited), or you fell prey to the false but widely held belief that the SNES or Sega Genesis (Mega Drive) were the 'better' 16bit consoles. It's OK, I forgive you.

In fact, I forgive us all, because no one has yet come to terms with the promises first set by the TurboGrafx: tininess and ubiquity. The Japanese version, which bore the confusing title PC Engine, was a tiny thing (less than six inches square), whose games came on thin ROM cartridges known as HuCards. Thanks to the modest size of the internal electronics and the game cartridges, NEC was able to create a handheld system that was technically identical to the home console. The very same games you played in front of the television could be pocketed and played some more on the bus or at the park.

It was expensive (as much as US$300 or so), and it didn't sell very well. But the value proposition was clear: instead of investing in a monochrome GameBoy, whose simpler games you'd have to purchase separately, the TurboExpress offered the ability to play one set of games anywhere. Sure, it burned through AA batteries in doing so, but the same opportunity wouldn't arise again until the Sega Nomad, a portable device that played Genesis cartridges.

Twenty-five years later, we still can't play the same games across our TVs, PCs and handhelds. True, occasionally a PC release makes it later to console, or a console release makes it to mobile. Some games do release simultaneously on all platforms, a feat that requires designing carefully for different input methods, screens and attention spans.
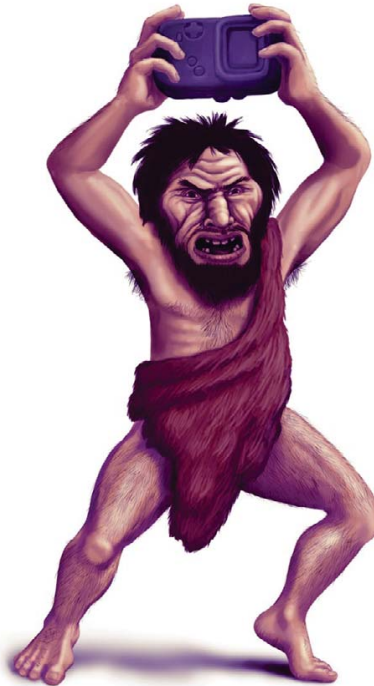
Twenty-five years later, we still can't play the same games across our TVs, PCs and handhelds

But even so, you'll have to repurchase the game on every platform you want to play it on. And thanks to the firewalls set up between devices, any progress you make in one place won't be reflected elsewhere. Today, multiplatform games are published to reach the largest possible audience, distributed across every possible platform. The market for games was much smaller in 1990, true, but the idea that the same game — the copy you already own, not just the same title — might be portable between systems remains a dream that probably sounds too crazy to ever be implemented.

It's not so crazy if you think about how other media formats work, or at least how they used to work. A video cassette or DVD could be taken with you, moved from your house to your friend's, for example. A cassette or a CD could be moved from kitchen counter to car. And a book — well, a book could be taken anywhere, or sold or lent or borrowed.

In this respect, other media has actually caught up with the digital Balkanisation of games. Movies and music and even books are no longer owned, but rented from various providers: your cable company, Netflix, Amazon, Apple and so forth. Transferring licences between devices is complex and time consuming, and often limited to a specific number of total machines anyway.

But perhaps there's still a chance that games could escape the sequestered fate they have partially helped create. Substantial differences still exist between game platforms, and indeed one of the ways console and handheld manufacturers market is by means of that differentiation. But game systems have also become a lot more homogeneous in recent years. PS4's design is simpler and more like a PC, and even Nintendo's Wii U has more or less shed the necessity of Wii Remotes. Meanwhile, cross-platform development and distribution has become easier thanks to environments such as Unity, which build to many different platforms with relative ease.

The missing bit is a business case for buy-once, play-anywhere games, and a technical mechanism by which to do it. Admittedly, it's hard to imagine such a thing any time soon, if at all. Even developers themselves couldn't create a means that would overcome the sandboxes of various platforms. And so we return to the TurboExpress, this time to lament it as a dead branch of a hypothetical lineage, a Neanderthal of past gaming's future.

Ian Bogost is an author and game designer. His award-winning A Slow Year *is available at www.bit.ly/1eQalad*

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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Ah, review season. It's the time of the year when nary a Friday goes by without the release of one potential system seller and a hatful of games that you'd have had a lot more time for three months ago. I've always been baffled by the way so many publishers put their games up against the year's biggest hitters like this. I mean, I understand it: this is the busiest time of year for game sales, and it's thought that even a middle-tier release will sell more copies up against *Halo* in October than if it had the third week of June to itself. But it's an old-fashioned way of thinking, one rooted in an era where a game only really exists for its first week on shelves. After that, it's a slow slide down the charts, off the purchase orders, and into the pre-owned section.

It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. So long as this industry holds true to the 'Q4 rules all' mantra, it will continue to be the case that Q4 does indeed rule all. But looking back on 2015, would *The Witcher III* or *Bloodborne* have done so well had they come out in the same week as *Fallout 4* or *Black Ops III*? CD Projekt Red and FromSoftware were forced into new release windows by delays in development, but I doubt they can have many regrets. Things are improving year on year, I think — the summer drought is no longer so parched — but not by enough, and not by design. *Bloodborne* came out in February because it wasn't ready for Christmas, not because Sony decided it would be better to give PS4's best exclusive yet a clearer run.

Sony is unlikely to have taken too much from its success, either. As a platform holder, it simply *has* to have a busy release slate in the lead up to Christmas — it is in the business of selling hardware too, and a steady flow of exciting new games is the best way to shift systems. But *The Witcher III* is a case study that suggests publishers would be well served to look at the other nine months of the year when setting their release dates. Six million sales in six weeks; even when the big hitters have come and gone, *The Witcher III*

Had The Witcher III come out in November, we'd all still have bought it, but how much would we have played it?

will be one of the fastest- and best-selling games of 2015. It came out in mid-May.

Had The *Witcher III* come out in November, I'm sure we'd all still have bought it, but how much would we have played it? There's a certain rhythm to being a videogame player when the clocks go back: games are bought every Friday, played for a few hours, then put aside for the next big thing. We go to the checkout once a week with that slight twinge of guilt. This is a time for spending on other people, not ourselves. Yet here we are, buying another game we don't need right now and mentally

rewriting our Christmas lists, cancelling nights out, and wondering if cellophane wrap and a carrier bag might be fashioned into a free makeshift nappy (a surefire route to a very different pile of shame).

And while it hurts us, as players, it's hurting developers and the games they make even more. While there's been nothing so far in 2015 (I'm writing this in late October, so there's still time) broken enough to rival last year's dismal run of *DriveClub*, *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* and *Assassin's Creed Unity*, it's clear that the need to hit the most lucrative release window of the year is resulting in worse games, or at least games not being as good as they should be. And given the increasing reliance on day-one patches, it's also clear developers are working at full tilt right up to the last minute to knock things into shape. Then that team of developers has to watch as a game they're maybe 80 per cent happy with sells well for a week, OK for a month, then next to nothing as the second-hand market takes over.

The more I think about it, the more I fail to understand who benefits. Not the publisher, which has to spend nine months of the year reassuring its stakeholders that everything will be OK after Thanksgiving. Not even the retailer, which would surely prefer it if releases were spread out a bit more instead of packed into what is going to be its busiest time of year for footfall.

But despite the ever-growing pile of shame, the stress of the increased workload, the bugs and disappointments and the inability to see much sense in any of it, I'm not sure I'd have it any other way. We play games because they excite us, and there's nothing more exciting than all of them coming out at speed, hot on each other's heels. Maybe Mum doesn't need that expensive present. If I don't go out, I can play games. And maybe it's high time we potty trained the kid.

*Nathan Brown is **Edge**'s deputy editor, and he has three more columns due for release by next Friday*
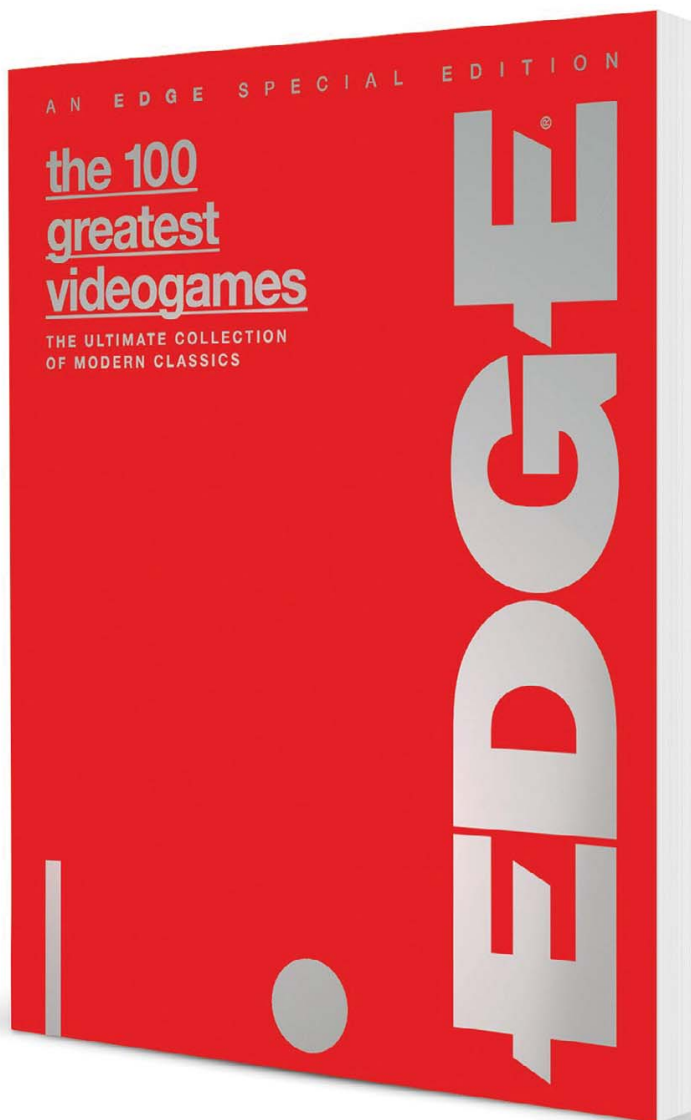
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HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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Combat evolved

Two years later, this generation is still looking for its *Modern Warfare*. Studios working in all genres are searching for the formula that will define multiplayer gaming for the next five years. The killstreak is dead, and with good reason: it catered to the slayers first and the cannon fodder a distant second, its toys the preserve of the few rather than the many. That won't do in an era where the battle is for player retention, not just their attention.

Titanfall and *Destiny* would suggest that cooldowns are the new killstreaks. Titans and Supers become available to everyone on the battlefield eventually, but the best players get them faster. Yet this month's Hype crop yields sufficient experimentation with that format to suggest that it is a long way from becoming the new industry standard.

Blizzard has designed its first competitive shooter, *Overwatch* (p40), around Ultimates, its character-specific supers. Unlike its peers, these are not governed by a cooldown but a meter, which you fill by dealing and taking damage, and healing allies. It is largely a reward for success, and might hew too close to the killstreak if your progress didn't persist beyond death.

The word 'Ultimate' is a nod to the MOBA, an influence to be expected from Blizzard, not Naughty Dog. Yet our first look at the multiplayer of *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (p48) yields a debt to *Dota 2*. In-game actions – kills, assists, revives – award money to be spent on upgrades, magical items or to call in NPC backup.

Things are further complicated by *Street Fighter V* (p50), which replaces its predecessor's tricky-to-perform Ultra Combo with the V-Trigger, a simple two-button move that powers you up for a while and is governed by a meter that fills as you take, not deal, damage. This generation may not have its *Modern Warfare* just yet, but if it continues to encourage such thoughtful, varied experimentation from developers seeking to claim the generation as their own, we're all for it.

WILD

Battling tooth and claw to survive
the deadliest enemy of all: nature

Publisher	Wild Sheep Studio
Developer	In-house
Format	PS4
Origin	France
Release	2016

Michel Ancel stands before the first-ever live playthrough of *Wild* and begins by saying, "I have to talk quickly, because the sun is going down." He's put a lot of pressure on himself: the original plan for this behind-closed-doors demo was to rerun the Paris Games Week trailer with the creative director narrating, but at the last minute he insists on going hands-on.

With Ancel admitting, "We don't have a precise idea of the limitations of the game," this decision might be one he now regrets. The sound cuts out, animations stutter, and at one point he hops inside the body of a rabbit, goes swimming and the game locks up. While understandable this early in development, it does signal that at this point much of *Wild*'s promise still resides in the heads of its developers, rather than is recorded in code.

But what Ancel's impromptu demo proselytises is the core message. Here you explore the relationship between man and nature from the perspective of a shaman who can summon animals, possess them, ride on them, and ultimately come to understand them. You might learn something new about humanity, too. "A very important thing is that during this period, which is five or six thousand years before Christ, the gods were animals," Ancel says. "If you look at Egyptian gods, they were a mix of animals

and humans, and now most gods look like humans. Because [back then] nature was the most powerful thing on Earth; now we think that we're the most powerful."

Wild is an attempt to knock us back down a few links on the food chain and restore our place in nature's web. Take the taming of a bear. At the beginning of the game, bears act as an enemy of sorts, fierce and unpredictable. While they're not necessarily out for blood, get between an ursine and its food — or, worse, its cubs — and you should expect a fight. This dynamic shifts dramatically if you can lead one to one of many shrines dotted about the landscape and perform a ritual, turning it from foe to friend.

Summoning different creatures' deities, here called Divinities, will be fundamental to your progression, too. In our demo, Ancel's shaman plonks a snake on a sacred stone and then enacts a ritual to call forth a giant goddess covered only by patches of green scales. Ancel stresses that the system isn't yet fully in place (the deity doesn't disappear so much as vanish like a popped bubble), but Divinities will take the form of mission-givers. And they'll ask you to make difficult choices.

You might be forced, for instance, to play as a serpent for three days so you can truly ▶

Michel Ancel, Wild Sheep co-founder

ABOVE **In *Wild*, you can see up to ten kilometres in any direction. There's no map, but well-placed landmarks and the varying terrain (swamp, mountain, field and so on) help you orientate yourself in this vast space.** LEFT **Divinities represent the forces of nature as well as their species. Some operate within murky grey areas of morality, and you should expect them to be capricious or even dangerous. Perhaps they'll test your resolve – are you really willing to sacrifice an animal pal to achieve your current ends?**

ABOVE **Even at this early stage, the list of animals with which you can interact is vast, including crows, eagles, sheep, bison, rabbits, bears, boars, catfish, snakes, wolves, and even frogs.** RIGHT **Creatures have simple, intuitive strengths. When the sun sets, for example, you might want to possess a wolf and then use its keen eyesight to see in the dark**

50/50

Ubisoft said last year that Ancel's creating "an extremely ambitious new title that is very close to his and the team's heart". It's unlikely to be a *Rayman* sequel, since that quote was issued soon after *Legends*' release, and a follow-up to *Peter Jackson's King Kong* is even less probable, so that can only mean one game: *Beyond Good & Evil 2*. Ancel clarifies during his talk: "It's very simple – I'm working half and half. I'm still working at Ubisoft. I'm here because Wild Sheep is my studio; *Wild* is a very special game and I'm trying to do very crazy things on this game. But it's two different things." But while we know how his time is shared, he won't confirm the other project. "Who said I was working on *Beyond Good & Evil 2*?" he asks. "I can't talk too much because this is not Ubisoft."

appreciate the reptile's plight. It immediately confers a whole new set of vulnerabilities and predators to contend with, such as eagles bolting down from above. Or you might have to decide whether to kill one of your flock of followers as tribute, and if you've invested time into raising one to maturity, then this has the potential to be a heartbreaking decision. Because nature is an impersonal force, there are no heroes and villains — just survivors. Throughout the course of the game you expand your team and evolve as a player, starting as a boy and growing into a man.

It's not only things with teeth that can kill you out here, however. Freezing rain falls from the sky and biting snow blankets the ground, threatening to end you. While the unforgiving elements are random, more regular is the threat of night. Time itself is a threat in the wilds of *Wild*.

Ancel cites *Don't Starve* as an inspiration. Find or build a shelter, he suggests, and travel only during the day. You'll also need to hide while summoning, whether that involves climbing a tree or ducking behind a rock, since your shaman can be killed while you roam the world as a beast. It's a feature that will give *Wild* rhythm, and a promising sign that Wild Sheep is anchoring its philosophical leanings to a solid structure. But again, it's a structure that exists only in theory. All that really happens when the sun sets in our demo is the visibility reduces to near zero.

Your overarching goal involves mapping the environment. You're like a primitive cartographer, pushing farther and farther into the unknown to acquire knowledge about the land and committing it to memory. "We want people to feel like there is a project to the game, there's something they achieve," Ancel says. "So you acquire territory and try to organise your next journey with all the animals. And it's up to you to decide, 'OK, let's start three camps [here], because I want to explore this part of the world.'"

Don't Starve isn't the only inspiration. *Wild* supports *Bloodborne*-style multiplayer in which players can open up their game to invaders, leading to the tantalising prospect of a frog-versus-sheep showdown. If you're looking for help rather than hindrance, co-op

is supported, and you can play as anything: one human can control a crow and provide aerial recon, for instance. There are no icons to mark human agency, however, so any animal might be another player in disguise, creating potential for a paranoid Invasion-Of-The-Bodysnatchers-style metagame, as well as a literal game of cat and mouse.

In fact, *Wild* is without a UI of any kind, dispensing with handholding as you chart its colossal, pseudo-procedural world, which is due to end up the size of Europe. "Right now, it's infinite," Ancel says, "but infinity can be a problem. [Our priority] is all about the combination of things and all the gameplay that can come from these combinations. We want every player, for example, to spawn in different locations so they don't see the same beginning of the game."

It's a fitting stance for a game all about playful experimentation. Every animal has a

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"We want people to feel like there is a project to the game, there's something to achieve"

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part to play, no matter how big or small. You could inhabit the body of a frog and paddle about near the shore to attract a catfish, then switch to the shaman and fish it from the water. Or you might borrow a rabbit as a live distraction device, baiting larger foes away so your shaman can slip past. Roaring is also possible, and this can be both beneficial and harmful. Rearing up as a bear makes some creatures flee, even driving them to kill themselves in panic, but this gives away your position to apex predators such as wolf packs.

At this point it's difficult to separate the dreamy landscape of *Wild* from the one inside Ancel's head. What's real and what does he want to be real? There's promise in a body-swapping survival game underpinned by an inter-species dynamic in which you use animals as your own personal A-Team, and a world that doesn't prescribe a specific way to play. Thankfully, while Ancel was worried about the sun setting during his talk, he and Wild Sheep have a lot longer until a dawn brings with it *Wild*'s release day. ■

OVERWATCH

A clear line of sight at Blizzard's best
new competitive design in decades

Publisher	Blizzard
Developer	In-house
Format	PC (consoles TBC)
Origin	US
Release	TBA

The hybrid origins of Blizzard's new competitive shooter become apparent the first time you press Q. This is how you access your character's Ultimate ability, named after and equivalent to the game-changing superpowers common to RPG-derived MOBAs. In this case, your Ultimate closes out a tightly designed loop of weapons, abilities and movement methods that define the (so far) 18 heroes in the game.

Sniper Widowmaker is a straightforward example. She wields a submachine gun that transforms into a long-range rifle when you hold down the right mouse button to scope. Via the Shift key, she can grapple up to ledges and overlooks, enabling her to reposition in vertical spaces not accessible to most other characters. This is mitigated by a cooldown. Press E and she can plant a Venom Mine, an explosive that leaves a lingering damage-over-time effect and also acts as an early warning system. *Overwatch*'s maps are linear but offer several flanking routes to the attacking team: while you are scoping out one of them, a Venom Mine can ensure that you're not attacked from another angle.

The one-shot lethality of Windowmaker's rifle (unusual in this game) makes information especially important to her. A good player will only need a glimpse of a foe's cranium to blow it off, but getting that glimpse is a process with a lot of room for finesse. This is why her Ultimate represents a game-altering shift: press Q and she drops her visor, granting sonar vision to herself and her allies for a period of time. Suddenly, those flanking enemies are exposed through walls. Huddled defenders and their chokepoints are revealed.

Making good on that information means working together. Widowmaker is great when taking on single targets, but weak against groups and entrenched positions. Just as her Ultimate rounds out her skillset, it synergises with those of other characters — a natural incentive to work together. If Widowmaker's Ultimate reveals a clustered group of enemies, for example, that might act as a cue for Hanzo to use his. He is an archer intended to lock down defensive positions, but press Q and he unleashes a massive spiralling pair of spirit dragons that pass through walls and devastate whatever is on the other side.

Pharah, meanwhile, is an Egyptian private security contractor in a flying suit that is part Samus Aran's armour, part Gundam. Capable of limited flight normally, her Ultimate locks her in place at the point of activation, haloed by a swarm of rockets that then pound away at whatever you point them at. This needs to be aimed carefully, so Widowmaker's sonar information can be key. Pharah is vulnerable ▶

Soldier: 79's name and look suggest his role: a run'n'gun assault class for players used to other shooters. His Ultimate ability grants him aggressive auto-aim, closing the loop on the *Call Of Duty* fantasy

Breaking Reinhardt's shield is often important in order to get at his team, but also encourages players to waste abilities on it that might be better used on softer targets. For this reason, he's a natural frontline fighter

while she's up there, too, so she might benefit from a shield sent her way in various manners by support characters such as Symmetra or Zeynata — and so on, across a broad roster.

This complex system of synergies and interdependencies is what is most MOBA-like about *Overwatch*, but all of it is moderated by the fact that this is also, resolutely, a shooter. There's no levelling up, no gold, experience or items, and your ability to use your powers effectively depends on your spatial awareness and aim. Those all-important Ultimates don't have a fixed cooldown; they charge up as you take, deal and heal damage, making their use contingent on participation in the match.

You are also encouraged to switch character mid-mission a la *Team Fortress 2* or *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*. *Overwatch*'s maps share a lot of common ground with those games. A given match consists of two rounds, with teams taking turns as either

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This is a game of iteration: strategies are tried against your foe, changed, tried again

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attackers or defenders. Attackers must capture a succession of defensible positions before the time runs out. On some maps, these points are static. Others shake up the formula by having the attackers escort a moving capture point as in *TF2*'s Payload.

It is risky for the defenders to hold the line right on the capture point itself, and the maps are designed to offer natural defensive chokepoints in the midfield area. This helps multiple runs at the same location to feel different based on teams' choice of characters and positioning. At its best, *Overwatch* is a game of iteration: strategies are tried against your opponent, changed and tried again, with every variable in play brought to bear. Ultimate abilities and moments of clutch skill punctuate a game that is as much about small decisions as it is about big moments.

Given that switching approach is a crucial aspect of play, every character in the game will be available to every player. Blizzard remains silent on the subject of *Overwatch*'s payment model, but if it is free-to-play then individual

heroes won't be part of the microtransaction scheme. But cosmetic items wouldn't be unexpected, nor would a business plan akin to *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*: a budget one-off fee supported by optional extras.

This is a game that would be served well by a low barrier to entry, because it is unusually accessible, particularly for an entry in this genre. While the increased emphasis on teamwork and special powers may be off-putting to fans of hyperlethal deathmatch, it plays to *Overwatch*'s strengths as an entry point to the genre. This is accentuated by the game's visual design, which feels both in keeping with Blizzard's established style and, somehow, new. Detailed maps suggest the near-future superhero fiction: towering mecha stalk snowbound Russian streets; flying cars idle in the streets of futuristic African cities.

Credit is due also to the character design. This is a more mature-looking game than Blizzard has produced in the past, particularly when it comes to the presentation of women: *Overwatch* includes a range of body types, ethnicities, and roles. Widowmaker is one of the weaker examples here — she's a sultry, purple-skinned French assassin — but others are stronger. Zarya is a muscle-bound Russian heavy wielding a giant plasma cannon, and Pharah is genuinely intimidating to encounter on the battlefield. Swiss medic Mercy might fit into the female healer stereotype, but she's joined in the role by the robotic Zeynata and Lucio, a Brazilian DJ on laser rollerskates. *Overwatch*'s accessibility goes deeper than its excellent context-sensitive tooltips.

This is Blizzard's most exciting new competitive game in years because it's neither a straight shooter nor another MOBA. While it's definitely the result of synthesis, our time with it reveals a highly capable merging of these familiar elements. It's far more elegantly designed than any other objective-based team FPS this side of *Destiny*, shaming the later *Battlefield*s when it comes to providing a meaningful strategic challenge to each individual player. It's refreshing to play a shooter that provides moments of individual glory with such regularity and transparency — all it takes is a tap of the Q key to change the face of the game. ∎

Proverwatch?

In the cases of both *Hearthstone* and *Heroes Of The Storm*, Blizzard was initially cagey about their potential for formal competitive play. Nonetheless, each title recently held its first world championships after seasons of international events. This time around, Blizzard seems more confident that *Overwatch* may have a future as an eSport. "We're dedicated to providing the support necessary to foster the scene," says director of design **Jeff Goodman**. That means spectator modes, primarily, and improvements to the 'play of the game' detection algorithm to be better at calling out different types of success. Blizzard also expects the community to shape *Overwatch*'s broader structure, tackling issues such as whether it should embrace *TF2*-style character switching or a MOBA-style drafting process.

TOP **Zarya's durability makes her a natural aggressor, but she's not simply a damage sponge. Her Ultimate power creates a singularity that can wipe out entire teams.**
ABOVE **Junkrat and Roadhog are the two most recent additions to** Overwatch**'s roster. Junkrat hews close to** Team Fortress 2**'s Demoman, while Roadhog resembles** Dota 2**'s Pudge – a neat summation of** Overwatch**'s primary influences.**
MAIN **For the most part, fights take place around established frontlines – but when those frontlines are broken, the resulting scrum can go either way**

TOP **Roadhog's hook can be used to pull entrenched enemies out of position, as is happening to Bastion here. Bastion specialises in locking down areas – and turns into a turret to do so – meaning this is a powerful counter.**
RIGHT **Maps have substantial heights to take into account the movement powers of certain characters. Even if you have to take the stairs to do so, breaking the enemy line often requires circumventing it in this way**

While the playable androids could pass for humans, the aliens' mechanoid army is deliberately industrialised, sporting rivets, bolts, screws and other odds and ends you might find in a toolbox

NIER: AUTOMATA

Machinery reigns in PlatinumGames' offbeat take on a cult classic

Nier: Automata director **Yoko Taro** isn't one for holding back. "When it was first announced [Square Enix producer **Yosuke Saito**] was going to put money into a new *Nier* game, everyone thought he was mad," he says. "And personally — I probably shouldn't be sharing this — but I thought he was mad as well." Taro's sinister grinning mask, which he always wears at public events, is resting by his side during our behind-closed-doors look at the game, yet his own smile is almost a carbon copy of the helmet's when he chuckles about the faith shown by his boss, Saito, who's also present. "I thought he probably wasn't going to make it back, but I'm very happy he's given us the money, and we are trying to use it well."

The investment has seen Taro temporarily relocate 315 miles from his home in Tokyo to Osaka, where PlatinumGames resides. Here,

a team spearheaded by *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* and *Anarchy Reigns* game designer Takahisa Taura has been combining the melee action for which Platinum is famed with the bohemian styles and genre-switching rhythms that sparked *Nier*'s cult following.

The studio's fingerprints are unmistakable: weapon juggling, responsive dodges and air combos immediately recall its back catalogue, perhaps unsurprisingly so given the freedom the studio's been given to shape the action-RPG's core fighting mechanics. "I'm just leaving that up to the guys at PlatinumGames — they just go ahead and make this really great action game without me telling them to do anything," says Taro, who claims to be "asleep behind the scenes" for the most part.

Yet Square Enix wants *Nier: Automata* to be more than just another acclaimed PlatinumGames title. "We don't want to

ABOVE **The mechanoids' chunky aesthetics mask surprising athleticism. Far from being dumb, plodding foes, they'll scuttle and jump around the maps with classic Platinum fluidity**

Google whacked
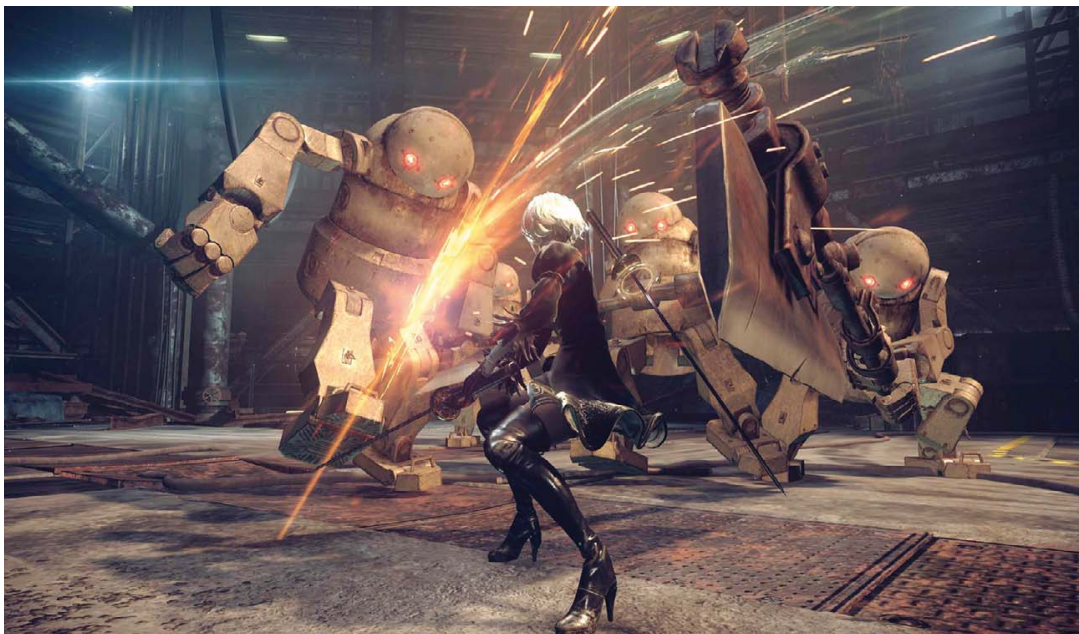
remake *Bayonetta*, because it's already been done," insists Saito, who's also eager to note that the latest build reminds him more of the original *Nier* than anything from Platinum's back catalogue. Sure enough, early footage shows glimpses of unorthodox diversions, including enemies that break out bullet-hell-style projectile attacks for impromptu *Espgaluda*-esque escapades. "[PlatinumGames] hasn't got a great pedigree with shooting games, so I'm going to have to watch very closely how they do those bits," Saito says.

The duo refuses to be drawn on comparisons with Platinum's other titles, instead pointing out that *Nier: Automata*'s focus is multi-enemy battles, with broader viewpoints than we're used to in order to show more of the terrain, giving rise to fresh tactics. Discover a staircase, for instance, and you're encouraged to weave its geometry into your strategies: pulling an enemy mob into a thin column before leaping and gliding over their heads, unleashing aerial kicks and following up with strikes to their backs.

With *Nier: Automata* pitched as a new game in the universe rather than a sequel, there's a lot here that will be unfamiliar to fans of the original. It takes place in a far-future where Earth's been invaded by aliens and humans have been exiled to the Moon. Eager to retake their planet, mankind builds emotionless androids and sends them to do battle amid the ruins of our civilisation — not against the aliens themselves, who are now in hiding, but against the mechanoid creations our planet's conquerors left behind.

Although this machine-on-machine proxy war may appear to be a setup to inspect AI and robotics in the plot, Taro waves away the idea. "It was more of a case of that, when we originally made the agreement with Platinum, we felt that we needed a futuristic setting to really bring out the action they do well, and androids as playable characters fit very well."

Which is where 2B comes in. The new lead protagonist, dressed in stockings, lace and a

Unorthodox diversions include enemies that break out bullet-hell-style projectile attacks

blindfold, is one such android, conceptualised by former Square Enix employee and then freelancer Akihiko Yoshida (*Vagrant Story*, *Bravely Default*), who has joined this project as character designer. "We didn't really think he'd agree to doing it," Saito confesses. "Then we approached his management and found out his boss is actually a really fan of *Nier*."

Alongside returning composer Keiichi Okabe and Taura's team at PlatinumGames, Yoshida's involvement represents a new hope for the franchise's successes. "The original *Nier* was a very interesting game, but actually making people want to play it took a lot of time in some cases," Saito says. "Now we really want to expand the pie and make sure that there's more people who will actually come in and pick up the game."

And as for the "madness" Saito's displayed in investing in this new team, the Square Enix producer believes he'll be proved right in the end. "I'm very, very happy and very satisfied with the progress so far," he says. "So, yeah, I think my money's been well spent!" ■

When *Nier: Automata* was unveiled at E3 2015, it sported the title *Nier: New Project*. Not to avoid spoiling the game's theme (the words 'doll', 'human' and 'machine' all appeared in code in the reveal trailer), but because the actual title hadn't been settled on. "Because it's a story about androids, I wanted to call it *Nier: Android*," reveals director Yoko Taro. "Obviously Google's got the trademark [on Android] and we were worried about it. There was no title fixed by the time E3 came, so we had to do the presentation without." As for the replacement name? "*Automata*'s a very good title – it's representative because it covers all kinds of meanings."

D R E A M S

Defining the indefinable game

Creation and play are one and the same, wrapped up in the systems that Media Molecule believes will encourage us to experiment. The studio keeps revisiting the word 'performance', likening *Dreams* to a platform on which players can express themselves

Everyone has experienced dreams that have rapidly faded into nothingness the moment they awake, and times where clutching onto the fragments of what just occurred has been like trying to pick up honey with tweezers. In these fleeting seconds, you're able to sense, almost see, the mental images dissipating, but feel helpless to solidify them. So perhaps it's only fitting that *LittleBigPlanet* developer Media Molecule is likewise struggling to find a concrete definition for its latest project. "We don't know what *Dreams* is," says creative director **Mark Healey**, after deliberation. "But we know what we want to do with it."

Healey's vision for *Dreams*' future isn't modest: his Guildford-based team is aiming to birth a connected virtual space in which, like our dreams, anything can happen. But unlike the images that sail through our heads

at night and are forgotten by morning, these dreams will be recorded, archived, shared, edited and pieced back together in an evolving, expanding network of more-or-less game-like creations, all assembled from a library of user-built objects and characters that you can add to as you have need.

The clearest way to grasp *Dreams*' abstruse framework is to compare it directly to *LittleBigPlanet*. In its most distilled form, *Dreams* plays like a three-dimensional *LittleBigPlanet* in which the Play and Create modes have been crushed together into the same entity. The studio's continuing struggle with self-definition stems, simply, from the fact that the content of a single dream can be whatever its author (or should that be 'dreamer'?) wants it to be. Conjuring up a label capable of defining any dream from a pool of infinite possibilities would be as
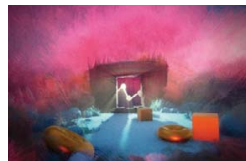
ABOVE **In object-creation terms, Media Molecule is supporting every control scheme it can imagine: DualShock 4 in concert with a PS Camera, DualShock 4 without a Camera, Move wands, companion apps, and combinations of the above. And, whereas** *Tearaway* **allows you to download papercraft creatures to print and make in the real world,** *Dreams* **enables you to export entire custom sculptures to be realised with a 3D printer**

fruitless as attempting to find one umbrella term for every single custom level made to date in *LittleBigPlanet*. Some dreams could be 2D shooters. Some might be football games. Others might be snowboarding adventures, or whack-a-mole diversions, or jigsaw puzzles.

Yet the potter's wheel isn't empty — Media Molecule is seeding its world with a story, making it easy to describe a 'traditional' dream, much like a 'traditional' *LittleBigPlanet* level is a left-to-right 2D platformer, even though that definition doesn't hold true for many custom creations. A 'traditional' dream, then, is a puzzle-centric adventure game chapter where each scene's exit must be found by toying with the environment and finding or building items to progress.

Take the small, sunny meadow at the start of *Dreams'* Paris Games Week demo. With a so-called 'imp', you can jump into the body of Francis the teddy bear and begin body-popping via DualShock 4's motion-sensing tech, but there's precious little else to do unless you explore the creation bubbles and begin customising the world. Just two objects are available in this scene: trees, for atmosphere, and a woodshed, the door of which doubles as the level's exit when built.

Moving from scene to scene, from dream to dream, involves finding and reaching portals to other places within the parameters of each dream. Portals can come in all shapes and sizes — doors, windows, wells, skylights, pathways into dense, distant forests and so on — and each dream's creator can define which items are available in any area. In some cases,

everything you need will already be present in the gameworld, and reaching the exit is a case of manipulating hidden switches, taking control of characters to ferry objects from one place to another, and combining objects (say, by attaching balloons to a platform to raise it higher). In others, there are no restrictions: players can create and import whatever they choose to help continue their journey. It's *Scribblenauts*, without limits.

At the heart of everything is the sculpture tool. *Dreams* has no rigid, developer-defined parts list: everything in the library has been moulded from scratch using the in-game editor, and can be edited by you. Even Media Molecule's in-house creators are restricting their own inputs to just DualShock 4 pads and Move wands. Creations can be saved and shared instantly, available for global searching, and anyone will be able to browse item

Each exit is found by toying with the environment and finding or building items

categories or type their requests into a text search bar to discover new objects, sorted according to their community rating. Object ownership is fluid, too — players can extract and modify existing creations before saving out copies, improving the pool for others.

All of this extends beyond objects. Players can compose sound effects and music, and record animations — saving and sharing them as pieces for future dreams. And all of the grabbing and placing of components is possible in shared environments as people play together. It's not a stretch to imagine a party of players picking through an adventure while a designated dungeon master modifies the rules and the environment on the fly.

With such nebulous plans for the game's future, it's little wonder Media Molecule is incapable of settling on a single definition for *Dreams*. Instead, it's now looking ahead to next year's community beta, where players can unpick what *Dreams* is all about — and hopefully show the creators of this world what's possible with the tools they've built. ∎

Fields of Dreams

The foundation for *Dreams'* sculpting technology was laid four years ago, when programmer Anton Kirczenow began experimenting with Move controllers and distance fields in DirectX11. Media Molecule created a small list of constructs such as cuboids, cylinders, pyramids, ellipsoids, doughnuts and more, and then supported addition, subtraction, colouring and soft blending operations. The team was able to begin building, its objects defined not by polygon limits but by the edits required. The method favoured improvisation over planning, and artists began adding and subtracting primitives on the fly, leading to the creation of objects with characteristic "crinkly" surfaces.

UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

Exploring Uncharted's newly chaotic and exotic multiplayer

You can't fail to be aware, as you conjure and apply a full-body coating of flame in order to grant yourself temporary powers of short-range teleportation, that *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer portion is merrily incinerating even the loose rules that formerly governed Nathan Drake and co's dalliances with the supernatural. But a set of paranormal abilities makes sense given Naughty Dog's intention to introduce more organised teamwork into its PVP play, even if that means empowering us with a litany of items, buffs and boosts unsuitable for the campaign.

"It's a culmination of ideas spanning *Uncharted 2*, *3*, and *The Last Of Us*," lead multiplayer designer **Robert Cogburn** says, and *A Thief's End*'s incendiary new abilities do seem indicative of Naughty Dog's increased confidence and experience in crafting a thrilling five-on-five, class-based contest. But

they also bespeak a series looking to funnel almost a decade of history into an explosive finale. "It's most likely going to be the studio's last *Uncharted* game," Cogburn says. Perhaps that explains the abandon with which items, locations and characters are being smashed together like action figures on playsets.

So short-range hops through space are granted to the bearer of the Spirit Of The Djinn, one of several mystical options you can select for your loadout, which also gives your melee attacks the power to kill with two hits instead of three. The Wrath Of El Dorado is another, a grenade-like weapon that summons a red-and-gold sarcophagus wreathed in smoky red spirits to attack nearby enemies. Alternatively, there's the Cintamani Stone, which revives the fallen to full health with a pulse, then lingers and speeds the recovery of downed teammates inside its radius. Although

Characters from across the series appear in *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer, all with new quips and contextual dialogue. Elena has her own lines for when a grenade lands near her, for example

ABOVE **While traversal is smooth, *Uncharted 4* will be relying on peer-to-peer servers, which may affect real-world performance. The lack of dedicated servers is especially troubling given that microtransactions are ostensibly being included here to support the game's multiplayer. Still, it has been promised that nothing will be gated off via the Naughty Dog Points currency, nor will it affect the game mechanics**

LEFT **These relics add to the multiplayer an overt mysticism that the main series tends to use more sparingly. More powers are promised, but Naughty Dog isn't ready to reveal them**

TOP LEFT **Maps emphasise establishing and moving fronts, leading to fewer scenarios in which you're shot in the back and more exchanges of gunfire. Rather than chase each other in circles, teams push back and forth against one another.** ABOVE **To maintain 60fps, Naughty Dog is rendering the multiplayer at 900p resolution. Singleplayer increases the resolution to 1080p, but reduces the framerate to 30fps**

The emphasis is on team play as five-strong squads clash in exotic locales. There's no story attached to the multiplayer, nor is it concerned with alliances or history, so you might very well see Lazarevic fight alongside Sully or Drake

matches are overtly chaotic and full of lurid colour, there's clear attention to balance, too. You can't take cover while using the Spirit Of The Djinn, for example.

Extra on-map bustle comes from your sidekicks, AI-controlled mercenaries who you spawn by using the pool of money earned through kills and assists. There's the Sniper, who acts like a turret and perforates enemies who wander into her line of sight. The Saviour trails you to keep you and other teammates stocked with ammo. He can revive players who are downed, too, helpfully automating the often-ignored support role.

The remaining sidekicks are the Hunter, who sprints at opponents to grab them in a hold so you can get a clear shot in, and the Brute, a straightforward heavy who can take lots of damage and dish out plenty of firepower in return. Some sidekicks are more effective than others, but the amount of in-game currency they cost is weighted accordingly. "The Brute's expensive," Cogburn explains. "We've seen people buy him late game, and he just turns fights."

Since everyone can spawn one sidekick, there's the possibility for 20 characters — ten human, ten AI — to occupy any of the eight launch maps at any one time. Although this has the potential to turn *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer into a massive, confusing free-for-all brawl, that isn't the case during our session, which is largely down to the map design. Instead of skirting rounded arenas, levels emphasise forming and reforming fronts. This means you're rarely shot from behind by unseen foes, and play is more about judicial use of totems and sidekicks in order to make your collective firepower overwhelm grouped opponents and push the line forward.

Although matches are chaotic and full of lurid colour, there's clear attention to balance

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Stages are all built with agile motion in mind, too. You can slide, zipline, climb, and now more easily interrupt animations, with fewer finicky moments in which you get stuck on walls or ledges. The downside of this is that it's not immediately apparent what you can scale — several times we leap at craggy-looking walls only to slide down face first. The new rope swing is more delineated, designated by specific environment spots you can target. If an enemy wanders underneath your swinging, press square in mid-air to land on them for a slick-looking instant kill.

It's a scrap of connective tissue between *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer scrum and its more focused campaign that serves to illustrate how two fundamentally connected movesets can be differentiated by context. Whereas the singleplayer's thrills operate within a scripted framework, Naughty Dog has reconsidered map design, added cooldown-limited powers, and emphasised team interplay to make *Uncharted 4*'s multiplayer a more freeform, and thus more replayable, offering. ∎

Trouble in paradise?

Several key Naughty Dog staffers have left the studio since 2014, including longtime *Uncharted* creative director Amy Hennig, *Uncharted 3* director Justin Richmond, lead character artist Michael Knowland, and art director Nate Wells. Actor Alan Tudyk has come out and said that "weird changes" convinced him and fellow voice artist Todd Stashwick to walk away from *Uncharted 4* too. **Neil Druckmann**, creative co-director, addresses the shift: "We pitched a pretty new story to the team, kind of like a new direction… A lot of things were pretty rough and just slotted in, so there was an ending, but it wasn't as well defined. At some point we defined more of the [plot] thread and a more definitive ending, and did a second pitch for the team."

H|Y|P|E

STREET FIGHTER V

A wrestler, jiu-jitsu fighter and a wushu warrior walk into a bra…

The first playable build of *Street Fighter V* had an interesting, uh, feature. If player two picked Chun Li, her character model's breasts would take on gravity-defying properties as the match loaded in, twirling away like nobody's business. It was dismissed as a bug, but it felt more like a mischievous designer giving testers something to gawp at to help while away some very long loading times. Little did we know that T&A would be a recurring theme: the loading screens may have lost their ludicrous jiggling, but Capcom sure has made up for it elsewhere.

R Mika, in fairness, has always been generously proportioned, but the leap from the *Street Fighter Alpha* games' anime-like sprites to *SFV*'s 3D models makes her assets stand out all the more. Her Critical Art super move sees her summon an offscreen wrestling partner for a tag move that culminates in the opponent's head being crushed between two sets of large, muscular buttocks — a new, comical take on the concept of a booty call. Brazilian warrior Laura is similarly buxom, and just as underdressed.

This isn't just about embarrassment, although those who have been playing *Street Fighter* for 25 years and are now worrying about playing this version in front of partners and children certainly have cause for concern. This is about more than gender-politics pearl clutching, too. What is most off-putting about Capcom's new-found penchant for the pendulous is that it's now borrowing a tactic from a quarter-century's worth of *Games That Are Not Street Fighter*, the pretenders to the throne that had to do something different to stand out, and chose to do so by exaggerating two things that, well, stand out.

While there's room for concern over *SFV*'s artistic direction, Capcom's gameplay designs remain intriguing on paper and intoxicating in the hands. And there are few clearer signals of the company's mechanical intent than the newly announced Dhalsim. Now older and in possession of a quite remarkable white beard,

the yoga master still has the keep-away tools that have stood him apart from the rest of the *Street Fighter* cast for all these years, his signature stretchy limbs now joined by a multi-arc version of his Yoga Fire projectile. But he has more offensive moves now, too, and real combo potential. He will, as ever, be best used at range, but it will no longer be curtains for him when an opponent manages to close the distance.

Other classic characters have been given similar mechanical makeovers. Vega can now remove and replace his trademark claw at will, using his fists for fancy combos and his steel for ranged pokes, a combination that has made him one of the biggest threats in the current build. Ryu and Ken have never felt so different, the former zoning with fireballs and his parry V-Skill, doing big damage in a few hits. Ken, meanwhile, is fast, flashy and aggressive thanks to a V-Trigger that works like *Street Fighter IV*'s Focus Attack Dash Cancel, interrupting the final frames of an attack and seeing him rush forward to continue the assault.

V-Skills and V-Triggers, moves unique to each member of the cast, mean that every fighter feels very different in the hands, a refreshing contrast to the *SFIII* and *SFIV* days, when the roster was united by cast-wide moves such as the Focus Attack. This will result in a tougher balancing job for Capcom, though. If the recent online beta is any guide, it needs to take a good look at Vega, whose overhaul may have been too generous. And time with the Paris Games Week build, which has an almost-complete cast, suggests Zangief could do with more love, an aerial variant of his Spinning Piledriver and the hit-absorbing Iron Muscle being scant compensation for the loss of several useful tools he had in *SFIV*. If Capcom gets it all in equilibrium, this will be the most varied *Street Fighter* yet made. Should it fail to, *SFV* may be remembered as the point at which the series went tits up. ∎

Money match

Capcom excitedly points out that this will be the only version of *SFV* you'll ever have to buy – an odd claim on the face of it, but then this series has been subject to aggressive iteration. Six extra characters will be added to the game in its first year, bought with Fight Money, an in-game currency accrued via daily challenges (throw a certain number of Hadoukens, say) and levelling characters by playing as them online (though this makes them no more powerful). It's a smart structure, the daily hook fostering engagement, while progressively higher levelling requirements should encourage character variety. The alternative is to pay with Zenny – here a premium currency – a Capcom calling card, first used in 1987's *Black Tiger* and since seen in the likes of *Breath Of Fire.*

ABOVE **Zangief's beta-build problems come from the loss of his *SFIV* incarnation's Banishing Flat special, which helped him close space. A V-Skill called Iron Muscle – which allows him to absorb a single hit and keep moving – helps, but not by enough.**
TOP **New character Necalli is a Maori warrior whose huge mane turns a lurid red during his Critical Art. He hits hard and fast, with a playstyle built more on quick damage than fancy combos.**
ABOVE CENTRE **Dhalsim's excellent beard is part of his default look, whereas Ryu's whiskers are reserved for his alternate costume. Outfits will also be bought with Fight Money rather than sold as pieces of DLC**

ABOVE **Arabian fighter Rashid was announced at the Dubai Game Show – if that feels like pandering, you should have been on the show floor, where match broadcasts cut away from loading-screen character models when the buxom R Mika was selected.**
RIGHT **Laura is the series' first-ever jiu-jitsu fighter. She's at her best up close, but is capable at range too, since she's also the first grappler to be blessed with a projectile attack**

51

ROUNDUP

FAR CRY PRIMAL

Publisher/developer Ubisoft (Montreal) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Canada **Release** February 23 (PS4, Xbox One), March (PC)

Before the news leaked in October, surely few would have foreseen this series would travel back in time to the Stone Age; then again, elephants to mammoths is a fairly logical next step. Indeed, while the setting is new, the structure is a familiar rags-to-slightly-better-rags tale. You play a hunter named Takkar, the lone survivor of an ambush, who must kill and craft his way through a primeval sandbox until he's powerful enough to lead his own tribe. The focus is firmly on melee combat against a variety of rival hunters and prodigiously toothed opponents, with rudimentary bows and arrows your only ranged options.

MIITOMO

Publisher Nintendo/DeNA **Developer** Nintendo **Format** Android, iOS **Origin** Japan **Release** March

Defying the hopes of investors, president Tatsumi Kimishima revealed Nintendo's smartphone debut would be a communication app featuring Miis, not *Mario* with IAP. Borrowing elements from StreetPass and *Tomodachi Life*, *Miitomo* will ask users a range of questions, the answers to which their Miis will share with friends. The announcement, coupled with a delay, saw share prices tank, but it's a smart move, consistent with Iwata's blue ocean strategy for Wii and DS.

ABZU

Publisher 505 Games **Developer** Giant Squid
Format PC, PS4 **Origin** US **Release** 2016

Resurfacing at Double Fine's Day Of The Devs event, it's clear this contemplative underwater exploration game is bobbing along. At the helm is Matt Nava and, as you'd probably expect from the man behind *Journey*'s influential art direction, *Abzu* is an ocean of calm, the ideal setting for a relaxing swim.

FURI

Publisher/developer The Game Bakers **Format** PC, PS4
Origin France **Release** 2016

A thirdperson brawler with art from *Afro Samurai* creator Takashi Okazaki, *Furi* offers a series of whirlwind duels against nimble rivals, fusing bullet hell with melee action. It's responsive and handsome, but does that title pertain to rage or hairiness? A rabbit-masked character suggests both.

AURION: LEGACY OF THE KORI-ODAN

Publisher Plug-In Digital **Developer** Kiro'o Games
Format PC, PS4 **Origin** Cameroon **Release** April
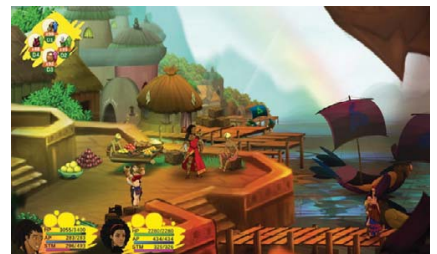
Inspired by African mythology, this action-RPG comfortably reached its crowdfunding target and is finally approaching the finish line some 12 years after its conception. The chance to experience a culture rarely seen in games is an exciting one, and gorgeous, combo-heavy battles are a real bonus.

Hoverboard
Self Balancing Scooter

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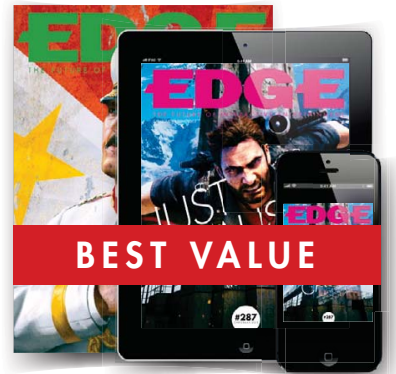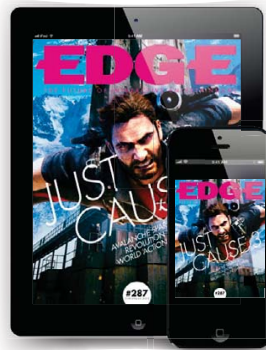
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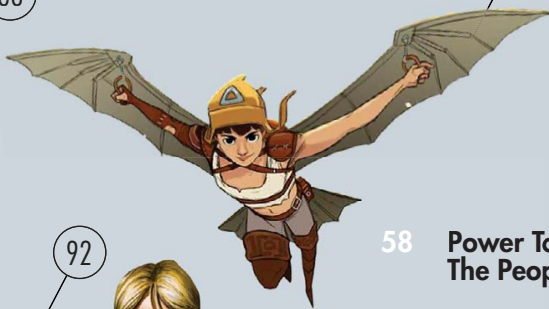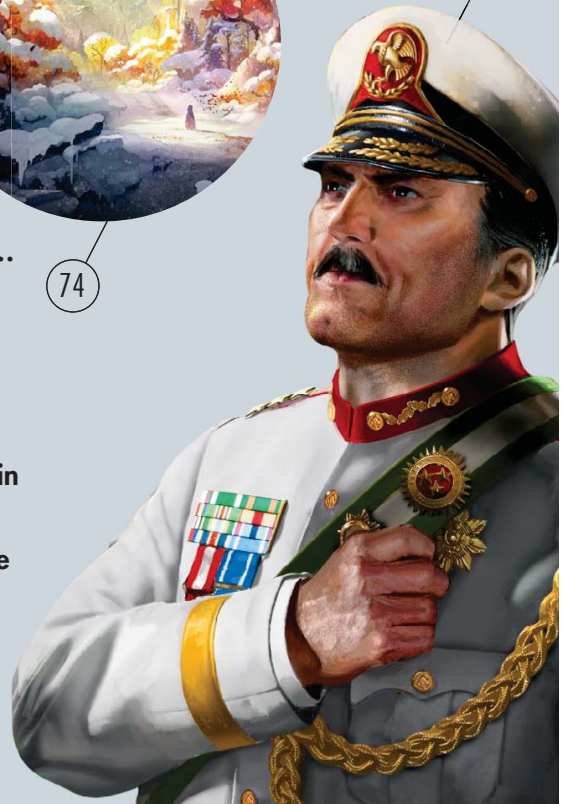
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POWTOPEOP

In Just Cause 3,
Avalanche liberates
the open-world genre
from its shackles

By Ben Maxwell

VERTHE
PLE

FIEND
MURDERER
TYRANT
HYPOCRITE

cience can't wait. We may technically be halfway through a mission, but who cares? Our PETA-baiting experiment is attempting to answer an important question for all mankind: what happens when you try to take off in a helicopter with a cow tethered to the rotor blades? The first attempt fails when we leave too much slack in the line, and after a couple of spectacular rotations the bovine is flung some distance from our vehicle. This time, we've gently tensioned the rope so that the animal carcass is dangling upside down next to the cockpit. The engine spins up, and the aircraft rises two or three feet off the ground, precariously rocking side to side in an increasingly violent manner, before tipping over entirely and exploding. Screen mildly reddened, Rico Rodriguez stands up unchastened from the tangle of metal and well-done steak, and brushes himself down.

OK. What's next?

"Not a lot of games that I've played make you laugh because of what the player does," says game director **Roland Lesterlin**, a mix of amusement and vindication on his face in the wake of our unorthodox testing. "There are games that are

videos about *Just Cause 2*," Lesterlin says, "and just seeing that people's enjoyment of the game really had nothing to do with the core narrative or anything else. People were just like, 'I can't believe I can tether two things together!' So my first instinct when we sat down with the leads and the team — some of whom worked on *Just Cause 2* — was: let's not break that.

"So we started with that core philosophy, and then, as more people joined, we found that everyone loved that part of the game too, and would laugh about it. I knew that if I could somehow convince people to keep laughing throughout the whole course of development, there would be something a little magical that's more than just the ones and zeroes that are behind the code. There's kind of a soul in that idea, and if we could capture that again, but also use the power of the modern consoles and all the fancy new tricks, we could maybe have something really special on our hands."

Though the process may have been a thoughtful, even delicate one, the manifestation of all that time-consuming work is anything but.

"GAMES THAT JUST MAKE YOU LAUGH OUT LOUD BECAUSE YOU'RE MESSING WITH THEM? THEY'RE A RARE BREED"

Roland Lesterlin, game director, Avalanche NYC

comedies, which make you laugh because they're very funny and have great scripts and all that, but games that just make you laugh out loud because you're messing with them? They're a rare breed."

As are games that bend over backwards to ensure that you're always having a good time. *Just Cause 3*'s Mediterranean-inspired setting of Medici is a convincing space, sure, home to a story of working-class resistance and a series of set missions to work through. Where other studios would seek to mandate that you absorb their scripting work, Avalanche instead has laboured extremely hard to ensure that nothing ever gets between you and *Just Cause 3*'s overblown, cascading physics and innate absurdity.

"Early on, as we were building the team, I got to spend a lot of time reading every forum that I could find on the Internet — and there are a lot of those — and watching thousands of YouTube

If players like tethering things so much, goes the reasoning, then why not allow them to use up to six lines simultaneously and throw in the bonus of being able to tune their tension in service of maximising the chaotic potential?

The result is an incredibly powerful and flexible tool. At its most basic, the Grapple Line still works as a fast way to get around the world, and in tandem with your parachute is a method of launching yourself into the air quickly. But you could also use it to construct a web of potential destruction in an enemy base, then collapse the ensnared structures like fiery dominoes. You could employ a couple of lines between buildings as a makeshift catapult, then launch unfortunate wildlife into the distance. Or you could take advantage of the fact that objects no longer have just a single attachment point and tether a man's

Game *Just Cause 3*
Publisher Square Enix
Developer Avalanche
Format US
Origin PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release December 1

BIRDMAN

Just Cause 3's layered, freeform approach to mission and world design is partly inspired by an unlikely genre, as executive producer **Adam Davidson** reveals: "We set out to focus on [our] core mechanics and build them up – as long as we apply all these different abilities to things and make them behave in a way that the user would expect, we can mix and match the behaviour. I read a quote recently that I really liked, which was basically, 'Anything you think you can do in the game you can actually do.' And that's what we were trying to accomplish – almost treat it like a skateboarding game, where it's not about if you can jump over something, but about how cool you can be while doing it."

TOP **Bridge destruction can be employed tactically to destroy enemies, or simply to cut off routes. But most of the time you'll do it just to watch them crumble spectacularly.**
RIGHT **The game revels in setting up explosions on a grand scale, obliterating the previous high-water mark for videogame pyrotechnics**
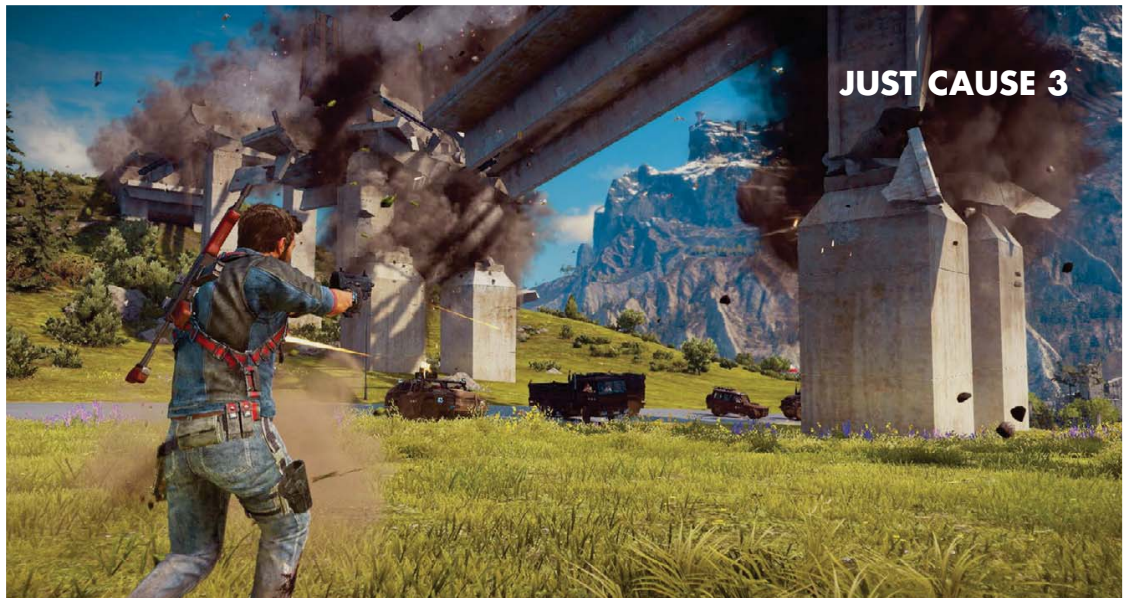
hand to his head, then quickly tighten the line, at which point he may ponder if he was better off under the rule of antagonist dictator Sebastiano Di Ravello before being 'liberated'.

This malleability is built into every aspect of the game, with systems that combine and cascade in response to players' probing. "Games such as *Minecraft* and even *Portal* came up with systems that are very much about player creativity," Lesterlin says. "And *Just Cause* is really focused on you, the player, and what you want to do. So we've built all these toys and systems that can interact, and even we don't know what they're all going to do together. I'm so excited for when the game comes out and I find a YouTube video of something I had no idea was possible."

One systemic partnership that is immediately evident, though, is the relationship between the parachute and wingsuit. Used in combination with the grappling hook, this trio of apparatus means you're able to stay in the air indefinitely. Transferring between the parachute and the wingsuit is no more complex than a button press, and the lift you gain from deploying the former affords you the height to plummet again. After some iteration, Avalanche has finessed your rate of descent, favouring a ratio of three feet forward to one foot down, which ensures that even without juggling items, you never feel like you're going to run out of sky. And if you do find yourself dropping down to lower altitudes than is really comfortable, Avalanche is ready to help you out. "We don't tell the players this, but the ground actually creates a little bit of upward lift all the time," Lesterlin reveals. "The reason being that it's *really* cool to be really close to the ground, so we just give the player a little bit of help, because it's hilarious." ▶

Q&A: CORMAC O'BRIEN
DEV SUPPORT ENGINEER, HAVOC

Just Cause 3's dynamic chaos has placed a significant load on Havok's tech. Here, developer support engineer **Cormac O'Brien** discusses Avalanche's limit-pushing design.

Games tend to use physics in service of realism, but *Just Cause 3* is more hyperreal than accurate.
Yeah, definitely — we love that kind of thing. I was talking to [lead VFX artist] Fred Hooper and he said [Avalanche] told him to ratchet up the effects, so he did. And then they said, "No — more". And so he ratcheted things up again and it's, "No, no. More!" And so he basically made explosions so big that they crashed the game. And they said, "Yeah, that's what we want!" We helped them to make that work.

How big was that challenge?
It's pushing all of our tech to the absolute limit — which is great, since that's what helps us improve our stuff. They're really pushing all of the destruction with detailed setups and levels of destruction. The petrol stations, for example: when they explode, it's in about five different stages, and each one gets bigger and bigger, and all the physics pieces are just scattered. It's such a great use of our tech.

The tethering is significantly more granular — is that one of the things pushing at the limits?
Yeah. With *Just Cause 2* there was basically just one [possible] attachment point on each object. So if you put a tether on your helicopter, it would be a certain point at the bottom of the chopper; if it was a person, I think it was always at their centre. But with *Just Cause 3*, as far as I can see from my own tests with deers and cows, it's so granular that you can just attach arbitrary points together.

Do you want to see more games go in for physics-based comedy?
Yeah, totally. It's actually one of the things I harp on about here at the office. We have debates about our favourite games, and I really like the ones where you can muck about and do silly stuff that's almost game-breaking. A lot of games will try to prevent you from doing ridiculous things because it doesn't serve the story or the game design, but I actually like being able to interact with a simulated system in unexpected ways. Just being able to mess with things — I definitely think it could be explored more in big-budget games. Just the sheer fun of messing about. ▶
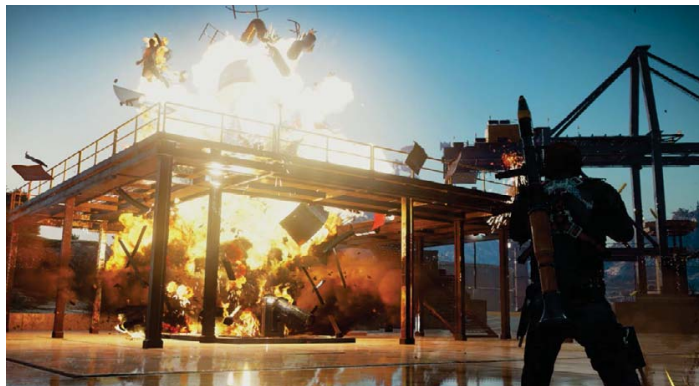
"Our tech is doing all the simulation of solid pieces that can collide with each other," O'Brien explains. "Avalanche has used that to layer on the sparks, flames and all the graphical elements you can see"

PERFECT
+2000

Wingsuiting manages to stand out as one of the more thrilling aspects of an already hyperactive game. You can add an air brake once you've played enough wingsuit missions, making crazy stunts a little easier

all this liberty is almost disconcerting at first. Where the industry standard is still to cosset the player with pronounced gating, guiding nudges and not deviating from the comforting familiarity of a decade's worth of ingrained design traditions, *Just Cause 3* stands back and dares the player to jump. Doing so takes a little courage, however.

"I see a lot of people play the game on the horizontal plane during those first ten minutes," Lesterlin says. "We're all used to playing games on that plane, but then our game says, 'No, go ahead and get up in the air. Use the volume.' And that's a scary moment, because you're like, 'Yeah, but I'm going to die a lot. If I jump off a cliff I'm going to die; if I fall from a moving vehicle I'm going to die.'

"And we say, 'No. Go ahead and fall.' And there's something fun, and as funny, about failing as there is in succeeding. Our difficulty ramp isn't about suddenly introducing an enemy that will snipe you [dead] in one shot — even though the snipers are pretty vicious — but a self-imposed one where you get better at pulling off whatever insane plan is in your head. If it all goes wrong, it makes you laugh. But when it comes together, you have that amazing sense of accomplishment, because you've rotated the camera backwards and are wingsuiting away as an entire bridge collapses behind you. The reward systems are right there."

The studio's confidence in players' creativity and its own systems result in an open world that truly lives up to that often misleading label. If, as we do, you choose to head to the most northerly and militarised region of the dauntingly large world map early on, face overwhelming odds and limp back in a stolen bomber jet, Avalanche doesn't get in your way. And if you then use that bomber to wipe out a smaller base that might have taken 15 to 20 minutes to conquer without the additional firepower, then so be it. It's a brave approach that risks unbalancing the game in the same way dangling cattle might unsettle a helicopter's delicate equilibrium.

"We had a lot of debate about that, and we were always nervous about the progression aspect of the game," Lesterlin admits. "But as soon as you start punishing the player for experimenting, there's a problem. If you're cool enough to go to a northern base, grab a bomber and come back down to obliterate an earlier base in a single bombing run, there's a reward in the fact that you thought of doing it, and were able to blow the crap out of the base. It made you smile, and there's 100 other bases — so, yeah, go ahead! And if you want to bomb every single base and that's your way of completing the game, more power to you.

"The more we held with the philosophy of 'Don't get in the way of the player,' the better the game was. And what we discovered was that, while you found a dominant strategy in bombing a base, after you've bombed it, at what point did you start thinking to yourself, 'I want to fly closer to the ground'? And, 'What if I stunt out on the wing?' And then you blow up your bomber, and you're like, 'OK, what else should I do?'"

He's right: soon after our early bombing coup, we lose our winged toy to the ocean in an episode of hubris that involves clipping the legs of an oil rig while trying to strafe an awkwardly positioned fuel tank. That means storming the enemy installation on foot instead, using the facility's blocky structure for cover as we ascend its platforms before commandeering the gunship sent to halt to our efforts. Yes, Rico is formidable, but once you've attracted the attention of General Di Ravello's forces, things escalate fast.

"One of our biggest design challenges was figuring out how to let players keep the level of challenge where they want it to be," says lead designer **Francesco Antolini**. "How do we avoid things becoming trivial when Rico is a one-man army, right? On the other hand, how do we make sure it's never frustrating? Because it would be easy to send out 10,000 enemies and artificially create difficulty. Thinking about that shaped the way we designed the combat and Heat system."

Trouble in *Just Cause 3*, then, is opt-in. So long as you haven't encroached on restricted territory or opened fire, enemies will warn you off if you stray too close to a base's perimeter. And guards patrolling occupied towns and cities will leave you alone if you don't damage anything (or anyone) while exploring. "This isn't a game where you're just travelling around and you randomly get heat," Antolini continues. "But you can create it at any time if you want. And unlike other open-world games, Heat in *Just Cause 3* can also be used as a resource, because it can be the mechanism which calls in badass enemy vehicles that you can choose not to destroy and take for yourself instead. That's an interesting option that you have each time that you get caught up in a battle."

But combat is just as easy to opt out of. Flee from the sphere of influence of whichever nest of hornets you've kicked and the world will fall quiet again, the music segueing into lilting calm as you drift or wingsuit away from the mischief you've instigated. And here, too, the game reveals its player-centric design and respect for your time. Any damage wrought on enemy bases or occupied
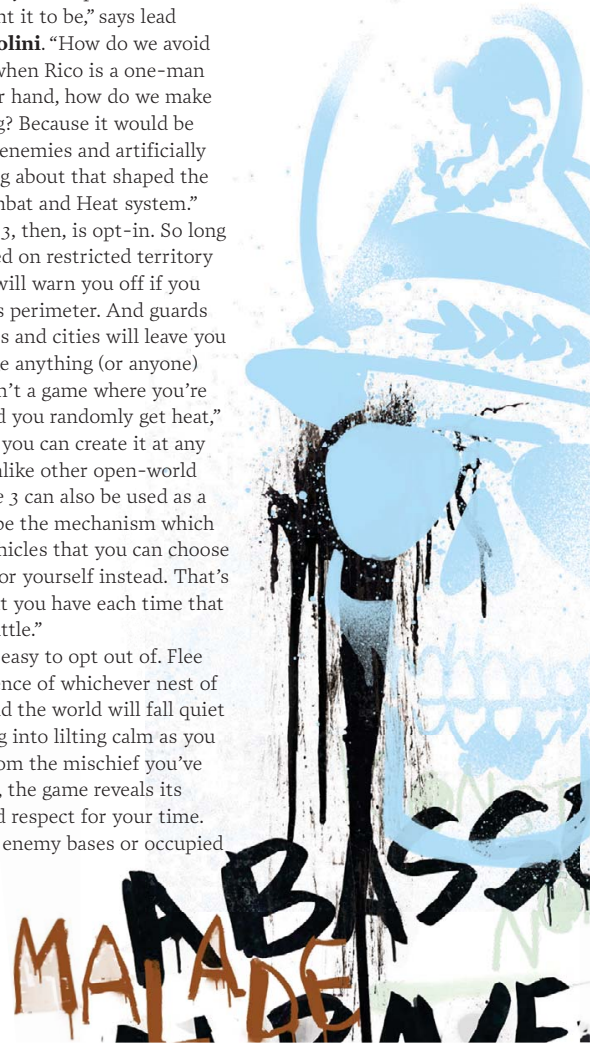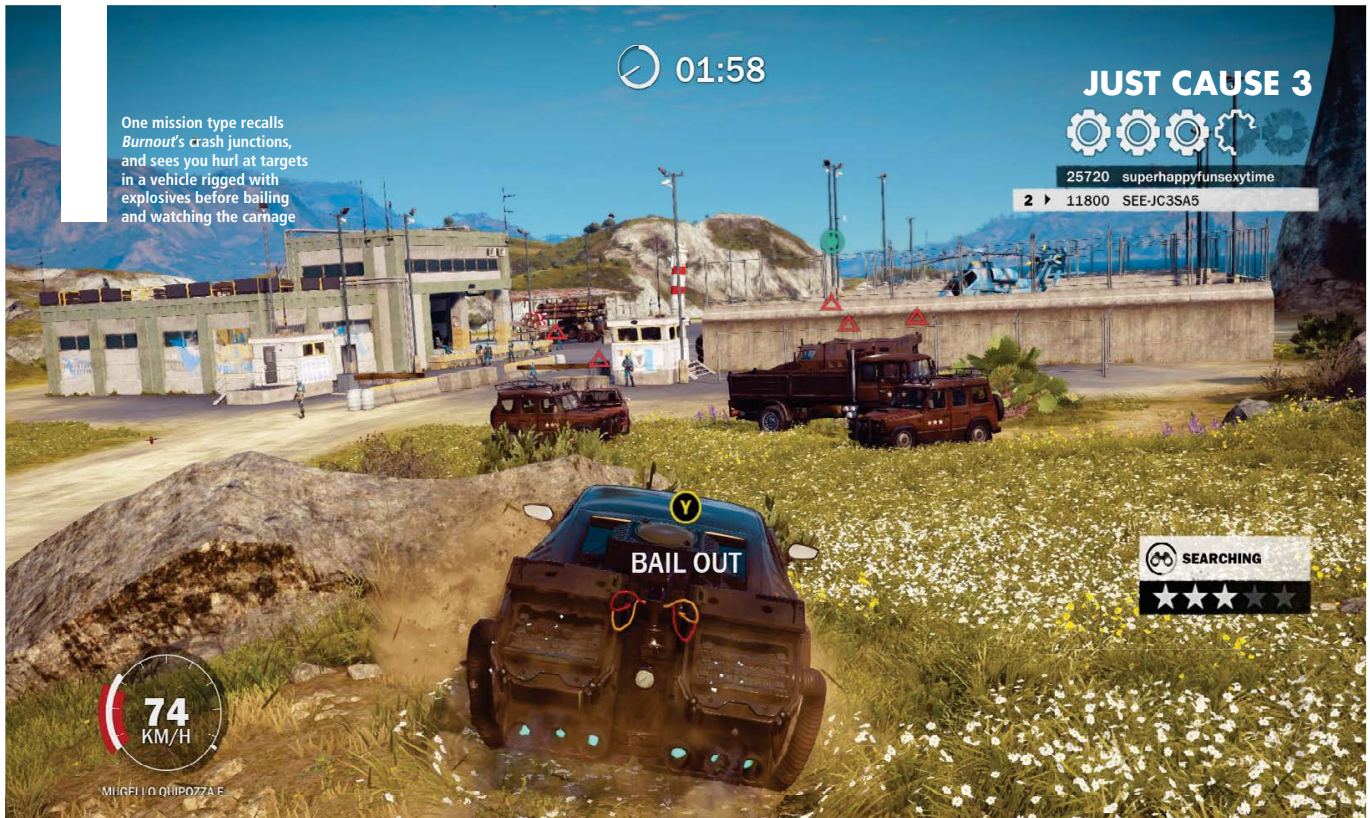
One mission type recalls *Burnout*'s crash junctions, and sees you hurl at targets in a vehicle rigged with explosives before bailing and watching the carnage

BAIL OUT

74 KM/H

SEARCHING

MUGELLO QUIPOZZA E.

"THE MORE WE HELD THE PHILOSOPHY OF 'DON'T GET IN THE WAY OF THE PLAYER,' THE BETTER THE GAME WAS"

settlements will remain indefinitely, ready for you to take up the cause again next time you visit (base personnel won't even bother to reprogram the surface-to-air missile launchers you hacked to fight on your side), so a failed assault never feels like a waste of time. And if you die while attacking a base, the game neatly deposits you just outside the garrison, tempting you to have another crack, your pockets generously restocked with ammo.

"We consciously defied some [design] conventions because we don't think they're fun," Antolini says. "It's not fun if a developer forces me to redo five minutes of stuff that I've already done just because a checkpoint isn't there. *Why* isn't it there? It's the same with respawns on death — I think the approach in *Just Cause* 2 was pretty brutal, since you just had ten spawn points on this enormous map. So we made sure they're everywhere for *Just Cause* 3."

"You can almost use it as a strategy," Lesterlin adds. "Blow yourself up, get more ammo and come back at it! But because it's quite simple in that way, we found that it encouraged people to take more risks and to play the game in the way that we hope players will: like a psychopath.

Rico's tethering device was created by the rebel leader's friend and collaborator, Deemah, who helps you upgrade it as the game progresses
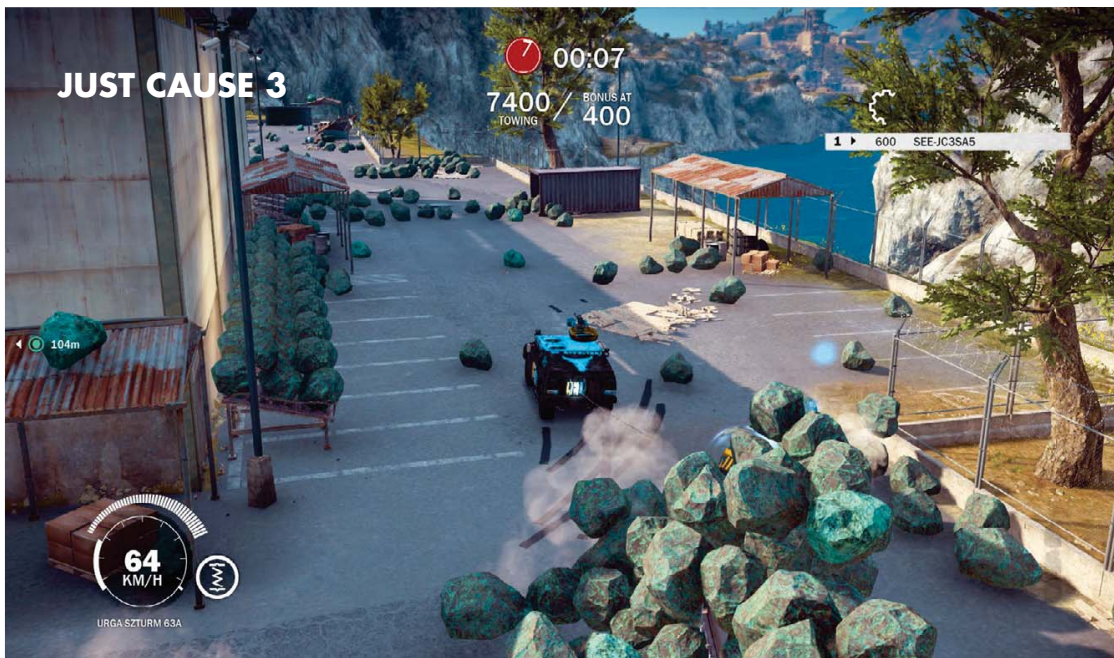
Just Cause 3 is extremely generous with the number of physics objects onscreen at once. You can also use the heads of Di Ravello statues as ad-hoc wrecking balls

Do whatever the hell you want to do. Go crazy and don't worry about it. If it all goes wrong and you die, you'll be right there and you can just carry on."

Another option always available to players is to call in supply drops. You can select a vehicle and up to two weapons from a menu of unlocked and collected kit (vehicles can be deposited at garages to add them to your fleet), and then toss a beacon wherever you want your crate of goodies to land. The box that tumbles out of the sky pops open in an explosion of colourful confetti, as if to playfully underscore the game's gung-ho attitude. And if you choose to place the beacon over enemy troops or vehicles, then they'll be crushed, *Metal Gear Solid V* style, by the box. It's stressed that the mechanic was in place prior to *Metal Gear*'s release and, as you'd expect, *Just Cause 3* dials things up a few notches anyway, allowing you to weaponise a naval destroyer by apparating it on your enemies.

There is, however, a rare limitation applied to supply drops: a cooldown timer. "I think when some players first see the countdown, they'll be like, 'Why'd they do that?'" Lesterlin says. "And that's what we were trying to accomplish. Every time we watched a tester, we saw them say, 'OK, well I can't get that; I'm going to try out this other thing'. And they'd do something totally different that was fresh and new, and made them laugh. So we knew it was a good idea."

But Avalanche can't bear even this restriction in the longterm: play enough of the side mission challenges that become available as each town or base is liberated, and you'll be able to reduce your cooldown to zero by unlocking the corresponding Mod. The idea is that by the time you've made a significant dent on the game, you'll have tried everything it has to offer at least once. Other challenge-won Mods include tweaks to the strength of your tether's contractive force, the ability to alter the character of vehicles by adding

nitrous boosts, and the power to jump, and the option to bolster your unlimited stock of limpet explosives with booster mines that turn anything you attach them to into ad-hoc rockets.

Mods can be toggled on from the menu and directly call back to the tinkerers who toyed with *Just Cause 2*'s limitations to great effect. Their inclusion ups the pandemonium potential further, and promises to make an already remarkably accommodating game even more customisable — leaping a heavy military boat over mines by using a boost jump is silly, unchecked fun.

It's rare to be afforded so much freedom in a game with such high production values. By boiling down its objectives to their simplest possible form (destroy objects and vehicles marked with red in order to turn the world map blue), building its systems to interact in as many different ways as possible, and throwing traditional notions of gating and progression structure in the bin, Avalanche graciously steps aside. The studio's designers remain in the background, an invisible fun-fixated influence in a game that continually reshapes itself around your ever-changing plans.

Take the Di Ravello statues that cast a shadow on every occupied town's centre, for example. A grenade or sustained gunfire will topple them, sure, but so too will a well-placed tether. You could liberate an enemy tank and take aim, or simply jump a car into the monument's stone belly, bailing out at the last moment. At one point, in another helicopter-centric experiment, we decided to see if we could decapitate one with the rotor blades, expecting disaster — or at least to discover something Avalanche hadn't thought of. No such luck. With some deft piloting, the statue was literally defaced, and we proceeded to cut down the other signs of occupation blighting the town using the same unnecessarily risky method.

SEA SEÑOR

"DO WHATEVER THE HELL YOU WANT. IF IT ALL GOES WRONG AND YOU DIE, YOU'LL BE RIGHT THERE AND YOU CAN CARRY ON"

"I remember us working on that exact problem," Lesterlin says. "When a player is flying a helicopter, we make the blades tougher, but the impact actually generates physics back to the aircraft, so we have to dampen how much it hits the helicopter versus the object that it's up against. We had all these debates about the rotor blades just to ensure that they felt fun. However, when an enemy hits something with their rotor blades, they get screwed and blow up. It's about shifting those boundaries all of the time."

With so many options available, we've yet to run out of amusing ways to liberate (and bully) the people of Medici after a concerted 18 hours of play. "Your objectives are simple," Antolini says, "but the ways in which you can achieve them are hugely varied. I really hope that when people talk about this game, everybody will have a different story about the missions and challenges that they all did."

But despite the game's painstakingly unobtrusive design, getting to the point where such improvisation becomes intuitive, and where you can comfortably string your movements together into one unbroken run of Hollywood spectacle, takes a little time and commitment. The hectic opening few minutes cram in quick tasters of many possibilities, but being shown something is rather different to embracing and fully understanding it. Lesterlin wants new players to keep that in mind when they first step in Rico's explosive world.

"I *am* a little worried," he confesses. "At around the one-hour mark, I just want people to give it another 20 minutes and really play around with it. Maybe go online and watch a video of what this game can do, and then go and try to do something that no one has ever done before. You're going to smile and laugh when you do, and that's *Just Cause*." ∎
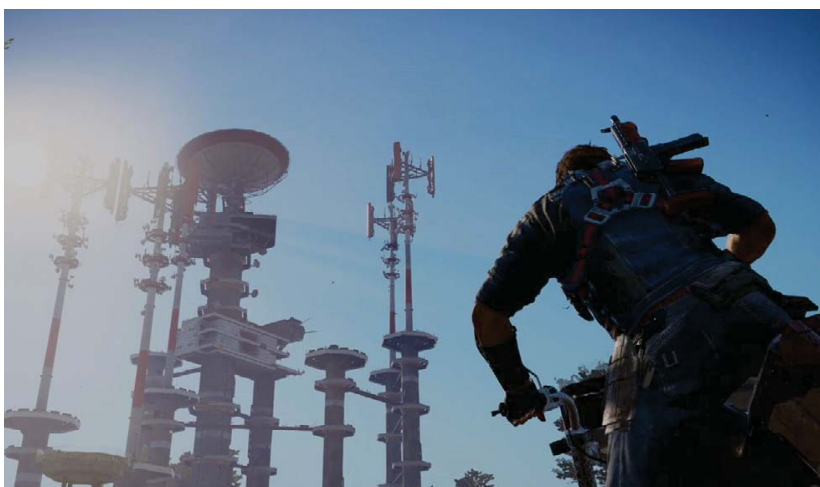
TOP **Combat seems chaotic at first, but allows for a lot of improvisation. Your parachute and grapple give you a significant advantage when it comes to outflanking foes.** ABOVE **Enemy base designs are highly varied, ranging from flat compounds to installations like this one, with its elevated platforms. These towering constructions call for creative aerial assaults**

HAJIME TABATA

Final Fantasy XV's director explains how difficult beginnings helped to strengthen his resolve

BY SIMON PARKIN

Hajime Tabata was offered a job at Tecmo after he left a memorable impression on the company's idiosyncratic founder, Yoshihito Kakihara, by giving him a sturdy massage during the final interview. The job proved something of a baptism of fire. During his time as a game designer at Tecmo, Tabata's responsibilities also included issuing formal apologies and listening to irate customers' complaints on the phone. These experiences gave the young designer a broad appreciation for the business of making and selling videogames — skills that he must draw from deeply as he steers *Final Fantasy XV* towards its release next year, after a development process that has been defined by delays and upheavals. This, after all, is a game that started out as *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* on PS3. How does he cope with the responsibility of making one of Japan's last remaining blockbuster videogames a grand success?

Let's begin at the start. Where did you grow up?
I was born in the north of Japan, in a place called Sendai. *Donkey Kong* was probably the first game that I played, [and that was] at a friend's house. But I didn't become obsessed with games until I was about 13. That's when I discovered western games such as *Wizardry*, *Wasteland* and *Civilization*. I spent most of my time playing these games on the PCs at my friends' houses, so my parents never made a fuss.

I was quite single-minded, even from my earliest memories at school. I worked to my own pace and did whatever I wanted. I used to hang around with the sports crowd, rather than the geeky crowd. I wanted to be attractive to girls, so that was the way I tried to present myself. Videogames were something I played at home, with the local kids I'd grown up with. I kept that hidden from my school friends. I thought I was so popular at the time. After high school, I realised the reality of what I needed to do in terms of studying for the future; I was pretty carefree before then.

I left for university in Tokyo, where I studied economics. Not because I was particularly interested in economics, but I just passed the exams I needed to do that. It was at college that I met an art crowd — people who were into cinema. Through talking to them, I started to realise I wanted to work in a creative industry, to produce something. I even looked at the possibility of making robots for a while, until I realised that I didn't have the necessary talent.

When I was a student, I was living on my own in a small apartment. I wanted to get a job to create something that everybody used. At that time, I had games, films, sweets and ramen. I loved noodles! I wanted to join a company where I could come up with recipes for instant ramen. Those companies were generally based outside of Tokyo, where I was living at the time, so I moved away from that idea. Games were a close second. They were all around me, too.

I wasn't specifically looking for a career in the game industry. I was interviewing with different companies from different industries. Tecmo was the first to offer me a job. I didn't have to think too deeply about it; I accepted it.

Since I was a kid, I've had a philosophy that there's always someone who is better than you. You can't ever be on top. Or even if you do get there, there will always be someone who overtakes you. In Sendai, there's a lot of snow, and kids ski a lot there. I was always the fastest at school, but then I entered a regional tournament. I soon found out that there were kids there who were quicker than me. Then I saw those kids who had beaten me at regionals would lose in the national competition. Then the national winners would go to the Olympics, where they'd be beaten by people from other countries. It was a tough lesson, but it stayed with me. Individuals are never as strong as a team. In my job, I love creating strong teams, which is something you have to do when you're making games. I see it as my role here to create the best possible team.

What was your first project at Tecmo?
My first project was *Captain Tsubasa*, a football game released for the Super Famicom. My first task was to design the special moves for each striker. I put all of the special skills onto a single character and it threw the balance right off. I was told off severely for that. It was a useful early lesson when it came to game design.

Being a game planner at that time wasn't only about designing the game. In that era, you had to pitch in everywhere. I had to work on smoothing off the jagged edges on the sprites, for example. I'd have to ask senior programmers to implement my ideas. We were rushed and pushed against deadlines, so my ideas would often get dismissed. I'd find that the only way to get people to listen was if my ideas were unique and stood out.

At the time, Tecmo was owned by one man. If he decided to make a change, be it to a game or to the ▶

CV

Hajime Tabata's route to leading Square Enix's flagship game has been circuitous, to say the least. He joined Tecmo after university, and worked on the likes of *Captain Tsubasa* and *Monster Rancher 2* there. In the early 2000s, he moved to Square, first making mobile games such as *Before Crisis: Final Fantasy VII* (2004) and then portable spinoffs such as PSP *Parasite Eve* chapter *The 3rd Birthday* (2010). The highly rated *FF Type-0* followed in 2011, and Tabata was promoted to *FFXV* lead after Tetsuya Nomura departed, a change announced in September 2014.

working culture, then everyone would copy him. One day he came into work wearing a suit. The next day everybody came in wearing suits too.

I experienced so many weird things in that era. Most of the game companies were still run by their founders at the time; they were sometimes pretty eccentric. It was so different to how it is today.

I was interviewed for the job by the president of Tecmo [Yoshihito Kakihara]. He asked me what I would bring to his company that was unique. I told him that I was pretty good at giving massages. He ordered me to come around the back of his desk to give him a massage on the spot. After a while, he asked me how his back felt. I told him that it felt like he was sick. That didn't go down well at all and I thought I may have blown it. Then, later in the week, the job offer came in.

Kakihara has passed away now, but he was such a bright and funny character. When I joined Tecmo, I had fairly long hair. I passed Kakihara's office and he ran out of his door to tell me that my haircut looked like that of a Japanese samurai. He asked me if I knew how to use a sword like a samurai. I pulled a pose and he told me I looked ridiculous and to come into his office for a lesson in katana.

Back then, the process of manufacturing games was pretty convoluted. Our sales team would have to visit retailers, tell them about the idea and actually have them place an order. Then we'd take proof of that order to Nintendo, and they would print the required number of cartridges to fulfil the demand.

When I joined Tecmo to work on *Captain Tsubasa*, the previous title the company had produced, *Rygar*, hadn't been very good. It didn't have a save system, even though the game is extremely long. People ended up pausing the game and leaving their console on overnight in order to pick it up the following day. It wasn't user-friendly. Word got out and retailers placed only very few orders.

After this, the president ordered the entire development team to visit our retailers in order to issue a formal apology. The entire team, including me, had to visit the retailer and apologise for making a horrible game. We had to physically get down on our knees and promise that the game we were currently working on was far better, imploring them to place a larger order. That was one of the first things I had to do after I joined the company, even though I hadn't been involved in *Rygar*'s development. It was harsh.

One time, I even took a phone call from an irate customer who had been playing *Rygar* for hours, then had knocked his Famicom and lost all of his progress. He chewed my ear off for about two hours about what had happened, and I just had to sit there and

"ON A PROJECT OF THIS SCALE, YOU CAN'T JUST MAKE THE GAME YOU WANT. YOU HAVE TO HAVE A BIGGER PICTURE"

The team listened carefully to player feedback from a demo of *FFXV* released early this year. *Episode Duscae* received a 2.0 update to address fans' thoughts just a few months later

take it. The company was crazy, but I learned about every area of game development there: design, art, programming, sales and even customer service. Those lessons were so valuable. Now I'm head of a large team like Business Division II, it doesn't fluster me when things go wrong. I've learned to deal well with disaster, to take it in my stride.

How did you come to join Square?
One of my friends at Tecmo moved to the company. He introduced me to Yasumi Matsuno, the creator of *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Vagrant Story*. I loved *Vagrant Story* so much, so when I had the opportunity to meet Matsuno, I asked him all about the game. I was extremely impressed. Matsuno knew everything about his game — every single little detail.

A few years later, I had the chance to move to Square and I jumped at it. But by the time that I arrived there, Matsuno had already left the company. I wrote to him to say I'd come to join him, but that he'd already left! It was a shame that we never had the opportunity to work together.

When I joined Square, I wanted to make a mobile game. Tetsuya Nomura was also interested in mobile games, so we started that project, *Before Crisis: Final Fantasy VII*, together.

It seems like a major jump to go from mobile projects to directing the company's flagship title, especially given that development on the game had already been a complicated process. How did that happen?
Every previous title I've worked on, whether at Square Enix or other studios, has been important to the company. But this is on an entirely different level. A numbered *Final Fantasy* title is a very serious business for the company. There is a great deal of pressure that goes along with such a role. That is certainly different. When you're working on a project of this scale, you can't just make the game that you want to make. You have to have a bigger picture, a more ambitious vision, even. I feel strongly about wanting to make the project successful. There are so many people involved across the company. I know the people, all of the details, the number of people who are invested. That's a huge motivating factor.

With a game of this scale, how to you keep a coherent vision? How do you prevent the game being nothing more than a melting pot of everyone's ideas?
The *Final Fantasy XV* team structure is flat. There's none of the traditional hierarchy that you find in large-scale game development. If there are lots of report lines, I find that important information stops at the top, and people on the ground don't know what the issues are, or what ▶

"LOYAL FINAL FANTASY FANS ARE VOCAL AND HAVE SPECIFIC REQUESTS. THERE IS PRESSURE THERE, FOR SURE"

key decisions have been made. I dislike that approach. Instead, everybody has the right to pitch in with the decision-making and to help resolve the issues. We have some meeting rooms on the floor, but generally I encourage the team to meet in the open space so that everyone else can hear what's going on.

One of the policies I've created for the team is that, even though each individual has different opinions, I want everyone to report to me about issues. I try to fix things immediately, rather than leaving them to fester for a couple of weeks. Everybody is free to report everything, and then fix it straight away.

Development milestones have different objectives for what needs to be achieved. For each development phase, I move the teams around. One specific structure doesn't stay from the beginning to the end. I run it like a series of football teams. Who is going to play alongside whom for any particular match?

Each team has its own responsibilities and objectives. By mixing these up, I find that it keeps motivation high. We've found that we're able to move quickly, and people don't lose their sense of direction. Our motto is: no borders; shared responsibility.

Final Fantasy is now nearly 30 years old. You have fans who have been playing for decades, but also new fans who have to be taken into account. Who do you have in mind as your player when you're designing the game and making important decisions?
It's very important to keep our fans, especially those who have been around for 30 years. But there's always pressure to be attracting new players, of course. I don't think we have to make a choice to appeal to one group or the other. In many cases, what works for one will hopefully work for the other.

How do you deal with the immense pressure of helming this project?
I don't feel much pressure on a day-by-day basis. That said, I've been surprised at the challenge involved in keeping fans happy, and to attract new customers. In

terms of appealing to fans, we've trialled many new things that we haven't done before with a numbered *Final Fantasy* game to involve them in the process in certain ways. Loyal *Final Fantasy* fans are vocal and have specific requests. If we don't deliver on those requests, or give them the information that they want, then they can get very frustrated. There is pressure there, for sure. We've found it difficult to know how to communicate with that group effectively. But it's a challenge that, right now at least, we're enjoying.

I think the two pillars that both fans and newcomers expect of a *Final Fantasy* game is a combination of powerful technology and a strong story. Those are the two [main elements] that fans have always expected from the series, and that's what we've focused on. The most recent two *Final Fantasy* games maybe haven't delivered on the technological aspect. So that has become a real focus for us with this project.

Do you believe that there's a future for these kind of large-scale games in Japan, especially in the light of the closure of Kojima Productions?
Well, in this team, we believe that we can survive until the company decides to close us down! We just don't know what actually happened to Kojima Productions, so it's difficult to comment on that situation, or how much that relates to the wider Japanese market. It's a rare case of a highly successful studio being closed down so, obviously, everyone is in a state of shock about it, I think.

Now that I have been involved in the development of HD games [for modern consoles], I've realised that the development style we used for PlayStation 2 games is outdated. Lots of Japanese companies that had been at the forefront of development in that era struggled to adapt, I think. So during the PS3 and 360 generation, the Japanese studios were trailing behind their western counterparts. But I believe that gap has closed significantly with the current crop of consoles. I think Japanese studios are in a much stronger position to fight against western studios, and to produce good work in the next few years. ■

After *Final Fantasy* series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, who left Square Enix in 2002, played *Episode Duscae*, he contacted Tabata to offer detailed feedback on the team's work

Tabata and his team have spent a great deal of time studying western open-world games. They consider *The Witcher III* to be a recent genre high point

NOSTALGIA FACTORY

Inside Square Enix's new micro studio, which
aims to recapture the Japanese RPG's glory days

By Simon Parkin

When **Atsushi Hashimoto** joined the videogame industry as a young designer, he made the decision he wouldn't work for Square Enix. It wasn't that he disliked the company or didn't get along with its bulging back catalogue of games, many of which Hashimoto had played as a boy. "These were the kinds of games I wanted to make," he says. "No, I didn't apply for Square Enix because I didn't feel it was right to try to recreate something you love so much."

It was a pact that Hashimoto has clearly broken, as we sit together in a cramped meeting room on the second floor of Square Enix's extravagant office complex in Shinjuku, Tokyo. Another floor is home to the company's cloud-focused Shinra Technologies division, named after the nefarious company at the centre of *Final Fantasy VII*. Elsewhere within the building, a team of hundreds toils on *Final Fantasy XV*, the company's current flagship, working under the guidance of Hajime Tabata, who hopes to establish a new technological and narrative high-water

mark for the series. In this sense, Hashimoto's job is diametrically opposed to that of Tabata's. He's leading a relatively tiny team that's returning to Square Enix's past, creating a game that hopes to recapture the spirit and ambience of the SNES and PlayStation RPGs of Hashimoto's childhood.

In fairness, Hashimoto didn't know that this – or indeed Square Enix – was what he was getting into at the time. The idea to establish a micro studio to work on vintage-style JRPGs came from Square's current CEO, Yosuke Matsuda. Rather than advertising his plan, Matsuda instead placed on one of the major Japanese game industry recruitment sites an incognito job listing looking for RPG creators. There was no mention that the company behind the advertisement has been responsible for many of history's best-loved RPGs. Matsuda, presumably, wanted to attract people whose passion for the genre was greater than their desire to adorn their CVs with a Square Enix stamp.

"When I first looked at the concept, I felt it fitted perfectly with those memorable RPGs from my childhood," Hashimoto says. "Games are constantly shifting towards high-end, realistic aesthetics, but I feel there's still a place for stylised ▶

The talent of a small band of dedicated artists pokes through the snow that envelops this fantasy world

presentation. There's another form of evolution that's not chasing realism. That's what I perceived in the concept. Now that I'm at a more mature stage in my career, I'm relishing the chance to return to my earliest loves." Hashimoto, who cut his teeth at Racjin, the Osaka-based developer behind *Bomberman 64*, *Trap Gunner* and *ASH: Archaic Sealed Heat*, an RPG directed by *Final Fantasy*'s founder Hironobu Sakaguchi, was offered a job. He along with ten other applicants form Tokyo RPG Factory.

It's a name that bespeaks an industrial approach to game design and manufacture. Arguably, during the 1990s, Squaresoft (as the company was known at the time) was something of an RPG factory. It released dozens of games in the genre, many of them experimental, from the science-fiction epic *Xenogears* to the multi-protagonist Super Famicom game *Live A Live*. Tokyo RPG Factory's debut for PS4 and Vita, *Ikenie To Yuki No Setsuna* (the English title is yet to be settled), however, doesn't display the slightly negative mass-production connotations of its studio's name. It draws influence from both Studio Ghibli's wistful, whimsical art style and, in a move that will please genre connoisseurs, *Chrono Trigger* in terms of its team-based battle system. It appears, in other words, well-crafted.

The project has only been in development for a year: the concept was written in September 2014, development began the following month and, by August 2015, an alpha version was complete. Built in Unity, the game is set in a snow-filled world and cherry picks designs from Square's back catalogue. Weapons and armour can be studded with enhancing jewels, much like *Final Fantasy VII*'s Materia. The cast of seven possible party members can be similarly switched in and out. The character models and environment design call to mind the little-known PlayStation cult classic *Threads Of Fate*. The game is divided into three spheres of play – town, world and dungeon – in the *Dragon Quest* style. And battles play out in realtime, as

in *Chrono Trigger*, with added interest in that, by timing your inputs well, you can deliver bonus damage, as in *Xenogears*.

The game fulfils its studio's remit, then, in terms of borrowing from the genre's past highlights. Nevertheless, the games from which it draws were, at the time of their development, the stars of Square Enix, created by huge teams that were given the most generous budgets. Today, Tokyo RPG Factory is a micro studio of ten people (although they partner with a further 30 or so external contractors). Despite this, Hashimoto is confident in the team's ability to deliver a game of comparable quality to its forebears. "We're fortunate," he says. "We've had a lot of talented designers who have joined for the project. They are vocal and, of course, have their egos. But we're good at working together and compromising. I think we're being saved by the calibre of people that we have on the team in that regard."

Regardless of whether or not the team can create a game that can stand next to the greats, the question of whether or not an audience exists for this style of nouveau-retro game looms. Is nostalgia enough to support the endeavour in commercial terms? "Obviously the nostalgia angle is important, and I firmly believe that market still exists," Hashimoto says. "Those are the emotions that we're trying to elicit. So, of course, we're trying to make something that's familiar, but also a new experience within the formula. If it's just the same as the old titles then it's not meaningful for us as a creative team. So, in the art and design, we're also trying to bring something new."

Something new, then, but also, Hashimoto hopes, something that lasts. "Our collective dream is that we create games that are memorable and that stay in the hearts of players for decades," he says. "Personally, I'd love to see this kind of style of game continue to evolve and, by seeing it evolve, to create and define new kinds of classics. There are so many things that we want to try out. Hopefully by making these things a reality, we'll also make something special." ■

While working at Racjin in Osaka, Hashimoto had the chance to work alongside one of his childhood heroes, Hironobu Sakaguchi, on the *Final Fantasy* creator's handheld RPG, *ASH*. "I was a battle planner and I was given a lot of freedom to do what I wanted to do for that game," he explains. "But at the time, I wasn't senior enough to have direct contact with Sakaguchi." Hashimoto resigned himself to the fact he would only be working remotely with his hero. "Then, one day, he came into the office," Hashimoto says. "I was awed. It was a different kind of emotion to excitement; it was more a sense of tremendous honour that I had the chance to have a hand in his next title. That was really the first time I felt like I was working in the games industry. It was momentous."

RIGHT **Like many classic SNES-era Japanese RPGs,** *Ikenie To Yuki No Setsuna* **features a cast of playable characters that expands as you meet and convince others to join your team. Each has his or her own backstory, skillset and combat style**

"WE'RE TRYING TO MAKE SOMETHING THAT'S FAMILIAR, BUT ALSO A NEW EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE FORMULA"

ABOVE **The game is one of the first titles at Square Japan to have been built in Unity. The engine has enabled the tight-knit team to make rapid progress in building out an evocative world**

COURSE

AND EFFECT

Setting sail in Bossa's mind-blowing Worlds Adrift, a fully physical and persistent world that's poised to change the MMOG's tack forever

BY ANGUS MORRISON

couring its official YouTube channel, it's hard to grasp what *Worlds Adrift* is, never mind what it might represent. During our first hour at Bossa Studios, our interest is aroused, but a flying-camera tour around *Adrift*'s shattered, sky-bound islands fails to epitomise the titanic undertaking, in conjunction with tech startup Improbable, that Bossa is reluctant to label an MMOG. The innovations aren't subtle, but rather so enormous as to demand a shift in perspective before their implications can be appreciated. As co-founder **Henrique Olifiers** and game designer **Luke Williams** mess about in the clouds, excitement starts to burn as if seeing *Minecraft* for the first time, and suddenly it seems a monstrous error of judgement that Bossa hasn't shouted and screamed about these features in its marketing. But the team is worried. *Worlds Adrift* is such a dramatic departure from Bossa's previous games, including *Surgeon Simulator* and *I Am Bread*, that anyone not watching live might reasonably call it faked.

Worlds Adrift is a vast, persistent physics simulation of a like never seen in singleplayer games, let alone an online world, and the technology it's built on threatens to change not just how we play but how every online game is developed.

Procedurally generated islands lace a billowing cloudscape, and from these – in line with many games looking to cash in on the construction and crafting boom – players can gather resources and process them into items, building airships to carry them onwards to new lands and opportunities. To begin with, it's wonderfully serene. *Worlds Adrift* can host any number of players, pulling new islands from a queue to maintain a balance of isolation, cooperation and conflict. Olifiers hopes you'll encounter

other crews with the same frequency as paths cross in *Journey* – a clear influence alongside *Skies Of Arcadia* and *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker*.

"The setting itself is common enough, isn't it?" Williams says. "But the argument I use is *Halo*: people are always like, 'Yeah, you're on this huge halo!' Well, no. The halo is a skybox and I'm just on terrain. A lot of these games use floating islands as a setting – they don't make full use of it."

Bossa's commitment to realising the broken remnants of a planet plundered for a levitating mineral has called for technical ingenuity. Clouds are not textures but volumetric shaders with strategic value, able to conceal fleeing ships as they manoeuvre through the fog. For this to work, each cloud must be identical for every player. Achieving that synchronisation meant two months of work, but Bossa has been approached by two companies hoping to license the technology for the likes of flight simulators.

Worlds Adrift is littered with history of the people who used to live here (several novels' worth, apparently) and by photographing and documenting your travels, you gain knowledge of new schematics to improve your engines, your cannons or perhaps your hull, the better to penetrate *Adrift*'s storm walls, which serve as progression gates. There's no levelling, only the pursuit of new tech, knowledge and the *EVE*-like freedom to decide your own objectives based on what you know. Here, *Worlds Adrift* steps back in time to an age when insight into an online world was shared by players and not walkthroughs.

"These storm walls change in thickness throughout," Williams tells us, "so if you ▶

Several features are the products of internal one-day game jams, including the glider and a camera to take selfies that you can frame

IT'S A VAST, PERSISTENT PHYSICS SIMULATION OF A LIKE NEVER SEEN IN SINGLEPLAYER GAMES, LET ALONE AN ONLINE WORLD
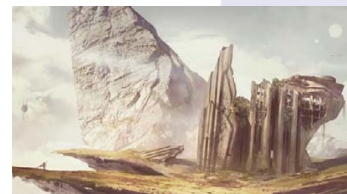
In a blow to quantum physics, dials and gauges on-deck continue to function when there's no one to observe them, ticking down as your fuel and altitude drop

HUMAN CANNONBALL

The staff at Bossa are still getting to grips with what it means for every object to be physically present in the world. Although an entity's properties are hard coded, its interactions with other objects based on those properties are just conjecture until you test them – it turns out the grapple is good for more than heavy lifting. "What we discovered was that I can catch cannonballs!" Williams tells us. "They're going to drag me with them, [but then] I've essentially created a way of launching players at enemy ships." The particularly skilful can snatch crossbow bolts from the air and swing their prize like a makeshift flail. If it impacts a player with sufficient force, they'll take damage.

Henrique Olifiers, co-founder of Bossa Studios

Components such as wings and engines can be attached to ship skeletons however you please, but physical propulsion means that symmetry is typically a good idea

Improbable's tech isn't just for physics. Engines can be drafted to handle the likes of ray casting too, as seen in *Adrift*'s crisp shadows

find where one's particularly thin, that's valuable information that's not easily transferred over a wiki or something. You're drawing your own maps, *Phantom Hourglass* style, and your place in the world is completely relative to what you've drawn. The players are generating valuable knowledge that's actually very local."

Each player's unique perspective on the world is the first hint that *Worlds Adrift* is more than an airship-enabled survival sim. This knowledge, recorded on a ship's mapping table, is permanent, existing until modified by a player or Bossa shuts down *Worlds Adrift*. It can be shared, sold, stolen or defaced, and the same is true of every last object: each tree, each branch you fell, each cannonball fired, and each wreck you abandon will lie there – identical to every observer – until disturbed.

"While we have the backstory of the world and all the history the players will be discovering," Williams says, "the present-day [game]world doesn't have anything unless the players put it in. So the stories of the crashed vessels and the camps that you find – they're all player placed. If this ship were to crash and all these parts were to fly off or be part of a wreckage, you'd be able to find that and go through it all and maybe find their map and all the notes of what they've done; you'll find pictures of where they've been, and so there's this strange storytelling that's real history."

Designer Luke Williams previously worked on Bossa's *I Am Bread* and *Surgeon Simulator*

Those dents aren't likely to buff out. Attach plating to your ship and it conforms to the curvature of the skeleton, retaining its shape and any battle scars should it pop off

GUERRILLA WARFARE

Your ships are never safe from the enemy. Being physical objects, any random Joe can swing aboard and fly off with it if you're not on guard, the sky pirate equivalent of leaving your car unlocked in a city centre. Combined with the grapple and hang glider, this presents new strategies for beating overwhelming odds. "There was a battle the other day where we had this massive multideck ship," Olifiers says, "and [senior artist Jack Good] was in a small ship that we took out – it just dropped from the sky. We kept on flying and all of a sudden the ship started to handle differently. I said, 'What the hell is happening? Is this a bug?' Jack was a stowaway. He was destroying everything from within."

The shipyard is an anti-gravity field used for constructing ships before they get their own cores. It takes some of the hassle out of physical construction, allowing you to attach parts with ease

"BECAUSE IT'S ALL PHYSICAL, THERE'S NO ESTABLISHED STRATEGY TO DO ANYTHING. IT'S A SELF-BALANCING SYSTEM"

Islands are drawn from a queue and arranged such that you're never much farther than one towering cloudbank away from sighting land

Stranger still, the first thing you do in *Worlds Adrift* is relearn how to move – and how to move other things. WASD still works, of course, but walking isn't your go-to method of traversal, for even Spider-Man would envy the freedom of 3D motion offered by your grappling hook. The rope, linking player to chosen pivot point, is a physical object: swing past a tree and it will catch in the branches, changing your course and momentum. Or, if you like, you could stand on the ground, weaving your rope around many trees to create a cat's cradle. You don't have to – there's almost certainly no point in it, and Bossa didn't code it so that you'd be able to do so. You just can, because all of *Worlds Adrift*'s objects are physical entities. If it exists, you can interact with it as far as the laws of physics permit.

Williams tries and fails to pull an engine up a hill, because it's heavier than he is. With producer Herb Liu's assistance, it begins to inch forward. The application of two anti-grav gizmos have it floating like a helium balloon. We then watch as Olifiers chops down a tree as he pleases, shearing a branch and then the lower trunk, toppling it with a tug of his grapple.

"If you roll one of these logs down a hill, you're going to kill the player," he says. "In the same way, if you take one of these logs and rope it to your ship, you can use it as a pendulum to hit another ship. You can do whatever you want with these things; they're physical objects. They serve as harvesting [resources], fine, but that's not where it ends; that's where it starts." Liu obligingly tries to crush himself with the engine.

'MMOG' is a poor label for *Worlds Adrift*, the concept of which is as different from *World Of Warcraft* as *Super Mario 64* is to *Zork*. Entrenched ideas of levelling and questing break down when you realise a dreadnought can be scuppered by flying above it and raining junk on the pilot (although the prudent may have built one or more backup helms below deck).

"It is literally impossible to balance because of one small aspect," Olifiers states. "Because it's all physical, there is no established strategy to do anything. There is no such thing as the best way of engaging in a battle or doing anything. There's no best way of chopping down a tree. It's a self-balancing system, because someone will find a way to do things and someone else will find a way to top it infinitely."

Worlds Adrift is for the discerning sky pirate: if you want to see the enemy smashed for no other reason than your own satisfaction, you'll want to disable their anti-grav cores; or maybe you want their ship for your own, in which case you'll need to leave it unharmed as you take out their respawners. The capricious could enter from beneath, leave a photograph as evidence of their presence and vanish into the night.

"It's not traditional MMOG looting – it's actually looting," Williams says as he cuts an engine free. "I have detached it from the ship, strapped some stuff to it so it wouldn't fall, and I've now escaped with it – I could take it back to camp or maybe use the ship's harpoon and drag it with me."

A lifelong videogame player accustomed to idiosyncratic reality-fudging will find that this physical world is not altogether intuitive. You have to learn how to problem-solve again. For example, if you needed to punch through a hull with tough armour plating, the normal solution might be to acquire a ▶

'Superior Cannon of Piercing'. In *Worlds Adrift*, a heavier cannonball will serve just as well. It's a shift from game logic to real logic.

In addition, *Worlds Adrift* promises an ecosystem of the sort that MMOGs have claimed to be implementing for years, in which animals and plants boast complex, interdependent AI and lifecycles that go far beyond spawn, fight, die.

"They don't spawn," Olifiers tell us. "If a creature is in a mating season, it has to find a gender-specific creature compatible with it. In the same way, they occupy an island, and if the player is just arriving to that island for the first time, there will be a balance there; but if you start to chop down all the trees and gather everything, the creatures will get hungry and be much more aggressive towards the player. The bottom line is: players could wipe out life from an island. We have systems to reintroduce life later on, such as flying creatures that migrate from island to island, or they take seeds with them or they poop something and it grows back."

This dynamic paradise is done justice by its prodigious draw distance. We're far out into the sky and Williams indicates a moving pixel in the distance. Zooming in with a camera (telescopes are in development) reveals a fully rendered Liu jumping and swinging from an island that looks for all the world like it's metres away.

We have an appointment with **Herman Narula**, CEO of Improbable, whose technology underpins *Worlds Adrift*'s feats of physics and permanence. Olifiers, having spent the morning in a heightened state of excitement, is now beaming at having

convinced his audience that what they're seeing is real despite reading like science fiction. The man we're due to meet makes him seem dour by comparison. Narula flits breathlessly between adoration for the latest build (which he often breaks off to try), an impromptu lecture on the science behind it, and planning new features with Olifiers. "I wonder if we can do water?" they mutter. "There's an optimisation or two we could do to actually get it to work."

With drive like this, it's little wonder that Improbable talked $20 million out of venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz. Early in developing its tech, Improbable reached out to developers brave enough to play guinea pig, and discovered everything it hoped for in Bossa and *Worlds Adrift*.

"It's the greatest metaphor for player freedom," Narula says. "It's explicitly in its bones: soaring through the clouds on wings. It is the absolute opposite of the constraints and boundaries people normally associate with online games. The notion of a world where every object you encounter will be interactable will be the best kind of statement for Improbable and our tech, which is about making everything come to life."

"We are very disappointed by the evolution of online games in general," Olifiers adds. "Where every single other area of gameplay and game design has been evolving a lot in the past ten years, MMOGs are pretty much the same. Can you imagine players who grew up playing *Minecraft*, where they have the freedom to do whatever the hell they want… It's impossible for a player like that to be put into an amusement park."
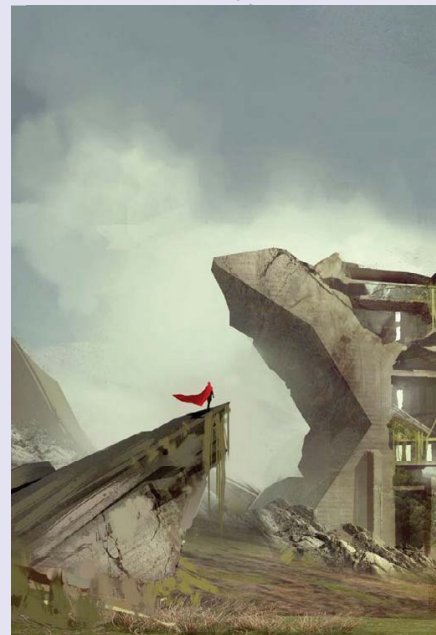
Journey **is a powerful influence. Though Bossa has stress-tested** *Worlds Adrift* **with legions of bots, it intends each meeting of crews to be significant and memorable**

"A WORLD WHERE EVERY OBJECT YOU ENCOUNTER WILL BE INTERACTABLE IS THE BEST KIND OF STATEMENT FOR OUR TECH"

In the heart of London's Shoreditch, designers, artists and marketers work next to each other in Bossa's open-plan office

01

02

03

04

01 **Bossa releases regular videos detailing development, such as iterations in the walk cycle.** 02 **Originally child-like in stature, character models have evolved into graceful adult adventurers.** 03 **You can't gain much height with the glider, but it might buy time to swing to something more sturdy.** 04 **Both fauna and flora take part in a simulated ecosystem, with migratory beasts such as beetles or sky whales carrying pollen and laying eggs to repopulate over-exploited islands**

01

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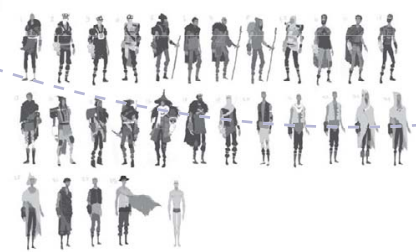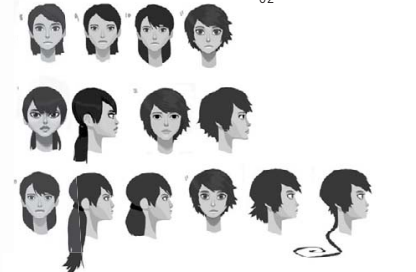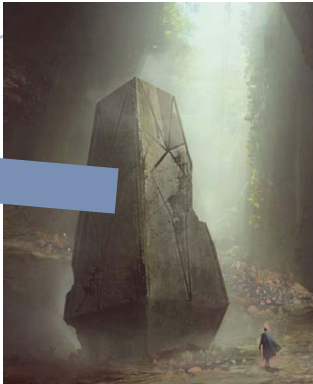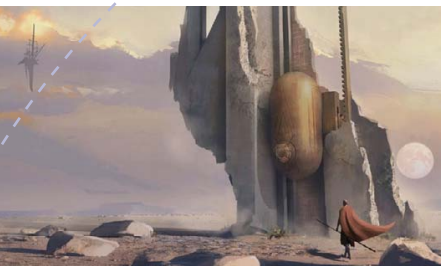
Improbable has already spread beyond games. Narula skirts around references to the defence and intelligence sectors, plus an unannounced project with a film studio that also involves Bossa, before deciding it's safe to talk about Manchester. The tech is being applied in service of the government's Smart Mobility Catapult to simulate the entirety of Manchester's transport systems to examine cases such as pedestrianisation and congestion. Investors seem to be tripping over themselves: "We went to the Valley for a week with three slides," Narula says, "and we had four term sheets by the end of the week. And the last day we met Andreessen Horowitz, and Marc Andreessen kind of made us an offer we couldn't refuse!"

USING BOTS, BOSSA LAUNCHED A 300-SHIP BATTLE INVOLVING 1,000 CREW, AND THE GAME RUMBLED ON UNSCATHED

The solution, as Narula describes it, is a rethink from first principles about how an online world is ruled by its servers. In a traditional MMOG, any given region of space is ruled by a server, handling everything from player position to chat. Clients act and the server reacts, advancing time by one frame and pushing the result back to everyone. Lag and instability develop where there are so many clients connected to the server that it can't process all the inputs before advancing time. *EVE* copes by slowing time; other games ensure what the server has to communicate is incredibly simple, allowing for mere scraps of logic unrelated to the players.

"We don't do this. This is bad. This isn't the best way to build a modern distributed system," Narula says. "Imagine if we presented to the developer a totally abstract world with no game loop, no time step – everything happens simultaneously. All entities really are is a little bit of state – like their health, their position or their rotation – and some behaviour. At its core, Improbable's system understands this abstract representation of entities and it cheats. Behind the scenes, we're able to run this on lots of machines because these entities are fundamentally individual processes.

"But actually this isn't that great. It's just this big abstract world. There's no physics there – there's no awesome game engine doing navigation and other stuff. And those game engines, they need game loops, so what we do is we have a separate layer and instead of one mammoth, intelligent server engine that understands the whole world, we treat engines like Unity as dumb little workers. We make them authoritative

over a subset of these entities in the world. So the entity says, 'Hey! I got rotation; I got position – I want a physics engine to do my physics!'"

The largest deployments tested by Improbable incorporated 200 servers with 700 instances of Unity running across them managing a world 160 square kilometres – an area the size of Israel. Using bots, Bossa launched a 300-ship battle involving 1,000 crew, and the game rumbled on unscathed. At this point, when server technology is no longer a limiting factor, design considerations take over. Thousands of cannonballs flying from all directions is unplayable chaos that would kill client-side hardware long before the servers started sweating. Now, designers are tasked with creating organic worlds that bring people together in a manner and volume suited to the intended tone.

The results of the division of labour are more profound than the ability to include true physics in an online game. Since the assignment of work is in flux, engines popping up and going down as needed, hosting the world is cheaper and more stable than the single-server equivalent. The failure of one engine can't scupper the game, which Narula demonstrates for us through a clean and legible browser interface: he kills an engine responsible for a collection of items scattered about a visual representation of *Worlds Adrift*'s islands, and its work is instantly distributed between those that remain. At Bossa, the process is attended by one man in place of a dev ops team.

The 'how' of the distribution is hidden from the designer – that's Improbable's job. The programmer codes behaviour in

Unity, using the Improbable API, and lets it fly – a new, live feature that didn't require downtime. *Worlds Adrift*'s hang glider was implemented after a single day's game jamming. More significant still, Improbable does away with the need for the multi-year development of networking code for a game to sit on: any game built with Improbable is inherently multiplayer, exposing the costliest genre to indie developers. Additional engines will be integrated with the Improbable tech as it develops.

Improbable and Bossa, acutely aware of the value in their offering, are employing shock and awe tactics, which, if successful, could cement their place at the forefront of online games for the decade to come. As Improbable's lab rat, Bossa has had to solve a great many problems of its own, such as the global physics in *Worlds Adrift*, contributing the results back to Improbable's code libraries. Dean Hall's mysterious work-in-progress, *Ion*, also uses Improbable and already incorporates code written by Bossa. However, the enormity of their joint ambitions is made clear in the revelation that *Worlds Adrift* will be forkable in its entirety: any new developer can press a button and generate a fresh copy of *Worlds Adrift*, running on Improbable's servers, to edit however they please. Anything Bossa can do, you can do.

"To be clear here," Narula says, "the modders or the forkers of the game will be able to support deployments of big sizes, just like Bossa can. It's a service that they're also able to use. If their version of the game is more popular, then people will be on that! And Bossa have a deal which means they'll do well too. The cost will be proportional to the scale of the world,

which is happening organically depending on how successful their game is."

Narula presents his approach to online gaming with such elegance as to make it seem impossible that this has never been attempted. It's easy to forget that it has taken the combined brainpower of former members of Google, Amazon, Goldman Sachs and Cambridge University to develop the technology, a feat he didn't see happening within the game industry itself.

"The reality is that the infrastructure we had to build didn't exist, and a lot of stuff we've had to pretty much invent ourselves," Narula tells us. "The game industry wouldn't have created an investment hole that would have attracted the non-gaming technical talent necessary to make it happen, because the problem sits between gaming and outside of gaming."

Improbable's approach to distributed systems is a solution to a general problem: many industries, from healthcare to utilities, need realtime, interactive simulations to run across multiple networks. Improbable splits work that was previously indivisible. Given demand and obvious investor interest, it begs the question of why Improbable is working with games at all. In collaborating with Bossa, Improbable hopes to showcase its invention in settings that provoke wonder – tactile game worlds that convey the potential of a new technology in ways boardroom PowerPoints can't. *Worlds Adrift*, which allows you to soar with friends in a ship of your collective design, sifting wreckage, and making history, looks set to do just that. ■

Herman Narula, CEO of Improbable, is three years clear of Cambridge and, along with Rob Whitehead, has found himself leading an enviably talented team
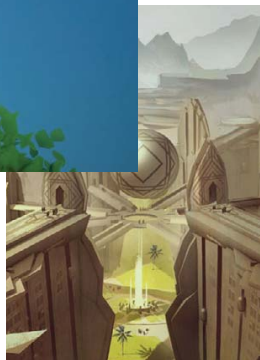
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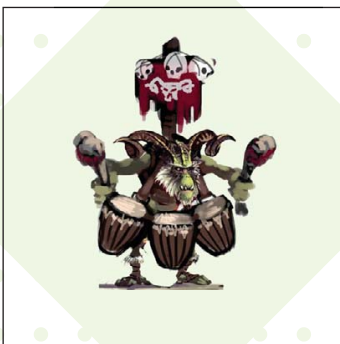
D I V I N I T Y :
O R I G I N A L   S I N

How Larian's systems-driven epic
picked up the CRPG where it left off

By Angus Morrison

EDGE

At a glance, *Divinity: Original Sin* is just one of the many self-published CRPGs that hoped to escape publishers' say-so through crowdfunding. It shares the nostalgia train with games like *Pillars Of Eternity* and *Shadowrun Returns*, but where these seem content with resurrecting and preserving what had gone out of fashion, Larian was convinced the genre had more to offer and took itself to the brink to prove its point. Under constant financial stress, the studio didn't so much embrace the new as throw itself headlong towards it and pray for the best, gambling on Kickstarter, Steam Early Access and the influence of YouTube, pushing back release dates against conventional wisdom until it had a game it was proud to call finished. Even then, Larian took to overhauling the whole for an *Enhanced Edition* that's free to existing owners and, as a result, *Original Sin* has outlasted its competition in the imaginations of players: a systems-driven, cooperative RPG in which smashing in a door or interrogating a pet are equally likely to progress your quest, provided that you and your partner can agree on which option is best.

Since 2002's *Divine Divinity* (renamed from *Divinity: The Sword Of Lies* because, as Larian tells it, its publisher was big on alliteration), a *Divinity* title has popped up every two to five years since, reviewing well enough but staying largely underground, possibly due to the whims of fashion or the extra polish Larian was always denied. The studio was stuck in a rut, then, and in 2010 something snapped. Even before rounding off the *Dragon Knight Saga*, 2011's enhanced re-release of *Divinity II*, the decision had been made to walk away from the publishing cycle – whatever the cost.

"It was our moment, I think," CEO **Swen Vincke** tells us. "We were a little bit tired of being in that work-for-hire mode, just making enough to fund the prototype for our next game, selling it to a publisher, and off you go again. That was not a very successful model for us, and we were stuck in a vicious circle. So when we started going independent at the end of 2010 we knew that that was going to be the moment when we were going to basically risk everything that we had and see where we could get."

At the same time, Larian was developing *Divinity: Dragon Commander*, a tactical RPG intended to be a single-campaign Xbox Live

For *Divinity: Original Sin Enhanced Edition*, Larian has had to rework the multilayered hotbars and skill books of CRPG tradition to cooperate with console controllers

game but which grew out of hand, as things tend to at the studio. When time came to focus on *Original Sin*, the team's members were all exhausted, and as if determined not to make things easy on themselves, they'd given up wrestling thirdparty engines into shape and opted to build their own tech, unsupported but for creditors and a trickle of royalties.

"IT'S ONLY NOW THAT DEVELOPERS LIKE US HAVE THE FREEDOM TO SAY, 'LET'S MAKE AN RPG THE WAY WE IMAGINED THEM'"

"It was a big risk," Vincke says, putting it mildly. "We started making the engine for *Original Sin*, and we actually started *Dragon Commander* on another engine, which was the Gamebryo engine back then, and then during development of *Dragon Commander* we switched engines to the *Original Sin* engine and bundled resources on the engine development. It was very tense and put us into a lot of trouble for some time, but it was clear that having control of the software was going to allow us to do much more than we would have been able to do with thirdparty engines."

The value of the in-house tools, despite presumably turning the finance department pale, is apparent upon arriving in *Original Sin*'s first city, Cyseal, and beginning a murder mystery of boggling complexity. Called to investigate the explosive killing of a councillor, you survey the scene, perhaps leaving the chest in the corner if

you don't have the key, or perhaps smashing it to bits with a club. You could ask around town for suspects or, if you have a certain perk, you could chat with the dead man's dog to see if he can sniff anything out. You could build a case against a suspect for hours or pick the lock on her back door and snoop about the basement.

The freedom you're offered is vast and sometimes baffling, and time and again *Original Sin* asks that you improvise instead of following instructions. Every box that litters the scenery can be moved by your characters (providing they have the requisite strength); poison vents can be blocked; mines can be detonated from a distance; hams can be removed from shelves to reveal secret buttons. This is a pen-and-paper RPG with all the dynamism that a dungeon master is able to describe.

"*Ultima VI*, and then directly afterwards, *Ultima VII* and *Ultima Underworld* were for me the very defining games that made me want to make CRPGs," Vincke says. "There were so many good elements in there that for some reason nobody was taking into the next generation of RPGs. That was something I didn't understand, and so I gladly used them in my own games! This was the end of the '90s; there were a lot of avenues being shut down because there was no more investment in certain genres. All of the world interaction, freedom and nonlinearity that you had in *Ultima* just made it too complex. It's only now with digital distribution and developers like us or Obsidian having the freedom to say, 'Let's make an RPG the way we imagined them,' that those avenues are being explored again. It's essentially a continuation of an evolution that was in progress but was interrupted for some time."

It's a philosophy that Larian calls N+1 design, using systems instead of golden threads to ensure there is always a new route for the player to try. Every new quest that was added had to be handled – or at least not broken – by all the mechanics in the game, from animal whispering to pickpocketing, and including the fact that every last NPC can be killed by the player. Lead designer **Farhang Namdar** describes *Original Sin*'s quests as a series of situational flowcharts as opposed to a list of events, because the team can never be certain where you're going to pick up the trail or solve a problem you didn't know existed. Though all roads lead to a final boss fight, *Original Sin* ▶

THE MAKING OF...

feels like a real journey that you can make however you please.

The aim of all this interactivity was to nudge the player to reflect on what they were doing, as opposed to haring off after the next quest marker, but when the nudge wasn't hard enough those of mere mortal ken could be left standing about wondering what to explore next. Reassessing the breadcrumb trail was a key part of moving *Original Sin* to consoles, where party- and turn-based RPGs are a rarity and Larian feared the mindset required might have been too big a change for the average player.

Unusually for a game that splits itself into free-roaming exploration and turn-based battles, the same philosophy of choice applies to the combat. In fact, Vincke insisted that the grid the AI uses to navigate in combat be invisible to the player to support the sense of freedom. Though defined spells are cast from a hotbar in keeping with RPG standards, Larian incorporated a synergistic system of elements – fire, water, blood, poison, oil and electricity – to add strategic depth that was nevertheless intuitive.

"Up to this day," Namdar says, "if you cast an oil spill or create a fire surface, it doesn't look exactly the same. There is a bit of a random factor in there that influences the growth of a puddle, and the fact that every turn was slightly different made this a better game. At a certain point, we had this chart with what surface could change into what – it was this huge flowchart and, during a couple of weeks, lots of smaller permutations crept in there that made the system more complex but also more dynamic, which really helped the combat gameplay. I was actually looking for it the other day. Apparently we only had it on the whiteboard!"

Two concurrent main characters, bickering and sniping, bring variation even to the great reams of text through which conversation takes place (and which Larian undertook to voice in its entirety for the *Enhanced Edition*). A product of Vincke's longstanding but always-thwarted desire to create a couch co-op RPG, the lone player can be scuppered by an obstinate companion feeding bad responses to quest NPCs. In co-op, you fight it out amongst yourselves in keeping with pen-and-paper tradition.

"Our lead writer, Jan [Van Dosselaer], had a hard time," Namdar tells us, "because we switched systems during production of *Original*

Q&A

Swen Vincke
CEO, Larian Studios

What convinced you to put YouTubers at the heart of your publicity drive?
When we were starting to figure out how Kickstarter worked, the first problem we needed to tackle was how to get people's attention. That naturally brought us to YouTubers, and from there came the fact that we started to get to know the guys, and they gave us feedback, and then I think they were completely smitten by the fact that we actually listened to them! And that's pretty much been our approach throughout development: if somebody comes up with a sensible idea, no matter who it is, we're going to put it in there if we have the means for it.

How was the working relationship?
Jesse [Cox] came over here as part of a promo thing and suddenly started lecturing. You know he's a teacher, right? He started all, 'This is wrong with your game, and this is wrong with it, and this!' And we replied, 'Yes, Jesse, you're right. You have a point. We know that, but thanks for reminding us.' Later on, when the game was released, and we were all feeling smug and happy that we'd got a 'game of the year' here and there, we did something called a Dev Line, which is like a live Twitch event, with Jesse, and he just went at it again! That kind of thing is the stuff that has been tackled in the *Enhanced Edition*. I'm very curious to see what he'll tell us is still wrong now.

Twitch is a very different beast to YouTube, though, surely?
We were at TwitchCon, where we were playing it together with a whole bunch of Twitchers – there's a lot of gaming intelligence out there. As a developer you would really be stupid to lock yourself in and not listen to that.

Sin. It was at first more of a keyword system like in *Ultima*, so you could ask anyone anything, but we got a lot of feedback and people really didn't enjoy it that much; it was a bit too hardcore. But the problem was the tools were already made for this – our writers had to actually make answers that incorporated the question in there as well so that it was really clear."

'Feedback' is a keyword to get any Larian employee talking, and our discussion is defined by the remarkable relationship the studio was able to maintain with its customers during and after *Original Sin*'s development. In 2010, when work began, Kickstarter was an unknown quantity, but

as development progressed and funds dwindled, it became clear that Larian would have to take another gamble. It asked for $400,000 and raised just shy of $1million (helped no doubt by the YouTubers brought onboard to spread the word), allowing the team to expand *Original Sin*'s featureset far beyond the original pitch of a "small RPG, super polished". But it was in Early Access, about which horror stories abound, that Larian and *Original Sin* excelled.

Story-heavy RPGs are not common fare in Early Access, where players could be put off by an unfinished narrative or get their fill and never return. Unfazed, Larian released the draft first chapter onto Steam and practically basked in the feedback, selling 80,000 units in addition to the 20,000 secured by Kickstarter backers. It was the last surge of funding Larian needed for the final polishing run it had hoped for since *Divine Divinity*, pushing the final release back again from February to June 2014. More than that, the team took pains to account for each scrap of constructive feedback.

"I think if you don't embrace it completely, it can be a horror story," Vincke says, "but if you open up and say, 'There's an enormous amount of hive intelligence out there, and if we're going to integrate that into our development, then we're going to make a much better game,' then you're basically setting yourself up for success. You also have to have the stamina to see that through."

"When Early Access came out, morale really peaked," Namdar adds. "There were a lot of people who enjoyed the game and they really liked what we were making. Up until that point, we had no idea if there even was any interest for a classical RPG – it was ages since one had come out."

Though it wasn't planned at the outset, Larian leapt at the chance to collaborate with nostalgic players in exhuming the remains of the CRPG, embracing new modes of funding and development on a budget that didn't leave any room for failure. Now that CRPGs abound, it's easy to roll your eyes and sigh at the story of one more Kickstarter success, but Larian waded in without precedent – with everything to lose – convinced that a systems-driven couch co-op RPG could be nothing but fun, but determined to listen to what the public had to say on the matter. The result was a game much richer than anything produced in the '90s, and a new benchmark for an old genre. ■
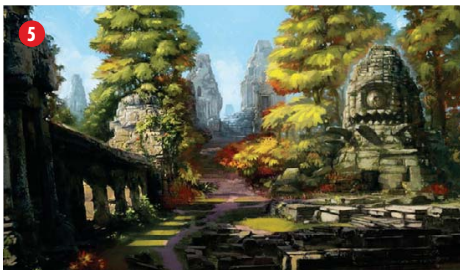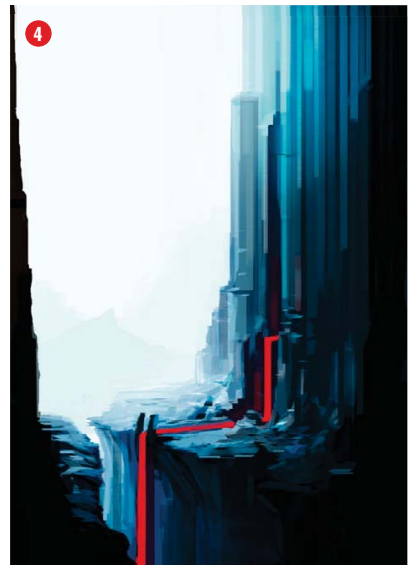
❶ With a she-orc who's bewitched into being someone's lover, and a brute grieving for his brother, these orcs are more nuanced than usual.
❷ *Original Sin* never lacks for colour.
❸ Larian embraced RPG clichés such a fire temples, renovating them into interactive places, not backdrops.
❹ Had the crowdfunding goal been missed, the game would have been shorter, not shallower.
❺ Ruins are as likely to contain frivolous distractions as they are story-progressing puzzles.
❻ The combat is vicious by default.
❼ The fire-wielding zombie is a curveball in the opening hours.
❽ Agreeing in co-op makes you better able to prioritise targets
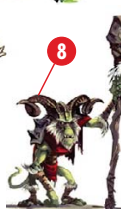
REVOLUTION SOFTWARE

The British adventurers
celebrating 25 years
in game development

BY CHRIS SCHILLING

This year, Revolution Software celebrated a quarter of a century in the videogame industry. Yet a decade ago, reaching such a milestone seemed unlikely. Despite the critical and commercial success of *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon*, it found itself in a financially parlous position. "At that point the recoupment model was broken," the studio's co-founder and managing director **Charles Cecil** tells us. So while the game's publisher THQ gleefully informed Revolution that *The Sleeping Dragon* had earned roughly $5m in revenue, this was scant consolation for the studio, since the conditions of the publishing deal coupled with the cost of development had left it in the red to the tune of £200,000. Cecil managed to negotiate more favourable terms for the follow-up, *Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death*, but by then the company had become unsustainable.

"We would complete a project and then start new concept ideas," says co-founder and COO **Noirin Carmody**. "There was a bit of overlap, but not enough for us to pitch our next prototype to a publisher and hope they would sign it up." Contract discussions added further delays, in part thanks to the company's desire to retain the rights to its intellectual property. "Publishers wanted some extra comfort because they weren't getting the IP, just a licence to sell and produce [our games] over a period of time," Carmody says.

In anticipation of the emerging digital market, Carmody steered the company toward adopting a new business model – moving from a larger in-house studio with around 50 staff to a small core team that would employ artists and coders on a freelance basis each time it began a new project. Without taking this step, Carmody believes, Revolution might not have survived. "The downside was we had this amazing team of people, and it was a tough decision to make."

It was the beginning of a new chapter in the story of a British studio which, true to its name, had helped shape an entire genre. Cecil had been writing adventure games since the ZX81 days, but during his time at Activision he became concerned that series such as Sierra's *King's Quest* had begun to take themselves too seriously. "I loved the idea of writing adventures that had strong stories, but that mocked themselves in some way," he says, "so you had that juxtaposition of the drama and the humour." Along with Carmody, then general manager at Sierra, Tony Warriner, a programmer and long-time colleague, and the latter's friend David Sykes, the four co-founded Revolution – once

Along with Cecil, co-founders Tony Warriner (left) and Noirin Carmody are still actively involved in the creative process

Sean Brennan, Cecil's friend at Mirrorsoft, had offered the publisher's support.

Following the now-famous incident where a stroke of good fortune saw thieves make off with a car radio while ignoring Cecil's expensive 386 PC, wrapped up and strapped in on the back seat, Mirrorsoft accepted the writer's pitch for a new adventure game, tentatively named *Vengeance*. As development progressed, the publisher's head of marketing, Alison Beasley, phoned Cecil to request ideas for a new title. Cecil fired back a list with a joke title at the bottom: *Lure Of The Temptress*. The publisher,

"THEY GAVE US ANOTHER THREE OR FOUR MONTHS TO BULK OUT THE GAME AND ADD SOME LURING AND A TEMPTRESS"

naturally, loved it. "I said, 'Alison, that's all very well, but we have a problem: there's no luring, and there's no temptress,'" Cecil recalls. "And she said, 'Well, can you put one in?' She talked to Sean and they decided the game was a bit small anyway, so they gave us another three or four months to bulk out the game slightly and add some luring, and add a temptress." After the sudden death of owner Robert Maxwell, Mirrorsoft quickly collapsed, but contract terms meant the rights to the game reverted to the studio. Sean Brennan moved to Virgin Interactive, and Revolution moved with him, the publisher releasing the game to wide acclaim in 1993.

Revolution's next two games were, perhaps, the developer's defining releases. After the release of *Lure Of The Temptress*, Cecil approached comic-book artist Dave Gibbons to collaborate on a cyberpunk adventure, having tried and failed during his time at Activision to licence arguably Gibbons' most famous work, *Watchmen*. The artist agreed. Despite his

celebrity, Gibbons threw himself into the project, enduring lengthy journeys from his home in London to Revolution's base in Hull to work on the game. "It was amazing, because that [Doncaster to Hull] train was an abomination," Cecil tells us. "At the time, we had a little office above a fruit machine arcade, and in one corner it had a kitchen that served bacon butties, and for us it was a great treat to go down and buy a bacon butty. And that was probably what swung it for Dave to travel up." Gibbons bought himself a copy of Deluxe Paint in order to create the art for the game's characters and backgrounds on a Commodore Amiga. "We worked very closely with him on the design," Cecil adds. "He contributed to the story, and was an absolutely integral part of the whole process."

Beneath A Steel Sky was a critical and commercial success on release, though the cult reputation it now enjoys is chiefly thanks to its freeware release in 2003. By 1998, Windows no longer supported DOS, making the game – along with *Lure Of The Temptress* – unplayable on newer machines. "The wonderful people at ScummVM asked us for the source code and the assets," Cecil tells us, "which we gladly gave them. They basically rewrote it, which meant that the game was effectively playable again on all modern systems thanks to them. And we decided, because the game was effectively of no value as a DOS product, we should just give it away. Then it became one of the games bundled with Linux packages, so a huge number of people have played it. Which, of course, has led to an awful lot of people asking us when we're going to make a sequel." ▶

Cecil (left) has overseen decades of traditional development. Today Revolution has adopted a flexible setup that allows staff to work remotely, though once a game goes into full production, the studio hires out an office so its freelancers can work closely together

The work of the team at ScummVM worked in Revolution's favour once more in 2009, when it ported *Beneath A Steel Sky* to iOS, providing a platform that allowed the studio to convert it to touch devices more easily than would otherwise have been possible. Its success encouraged Revolution to bring its biggest hit to a new audience. The story of *Broken Sword: The Shadow Of The Templars* is well documented – suffice it to say that this Paris-set adventure, with its absorbing central mystery, witty script and strong characterisation, is still capturing the imaginations of players two decades on from its 1996 debut, even if the Knights Templar are now something of a cliché. "We got there six years or so before Dan Brown," Cecil grins, "and our fans are absolutely convinced that The Da Vinci Code must have taken inspiration from *Broken Sword*. Now I would never make any claims of plagiarism myself, but I'm more than happy for others to do so on my behalf."

It wasn't the original that was ported to iOS but the *Director's Cut*, which had previously launched on DS and Wii, courtesy of Ubisoft. But it was Apple's mobile revolution that changed everything for the studio. "Instead of that broken recoupment model where effectively a developer got seven per cent, but against that seven per cent was your [cost of] development, now we were in a model where we could self-publish, and we were getting 70 per cent," Cecil says. The game sold steadily on iOS until, in late 2010, Apple asked to feature the game in its 12 Days Of Christmas promotion, whereby a free download would be offered to all iOS users over the holiday season. "We had just released *Broken Sword 2*, so it felt like a good way of promoting *Broken Sword* to a wider audience." In its original incarnation, *The Shadow Of The Templars* sold half-a-million copies; Apple's initiative saw the iOS version reach five times

as many players. "It became clear that if you had ideas and you produced games that people wanted," Cecil continues, "then it didn't matter how big you were, because ultimately you now had a level playing field."

Revolution was energised by the response, while the revenues were enough to republish the first two *Broken Swords* on PC via Steam and Good Old Games – which in turn gave the studio the confidence to start work on a fifth game in the series. After half a year, the coffers were starting to look rather bare and, as Carmody recounts, a collective decision was made to try to fund development through a Kickstarter campaign. "Tony, Charles and I had been talking about it quite a lot – and this was the early days of Kickstarter, so only the US company existed," she tells us. "Over the years we'd had plenty of letters, and the sales of our games [told us] there was an audience out there. We thought, 'Well, what have we got to lose?' and decided to go for it."

The campaign, however, took longer than anticipated. Revolution had to set up a US-based company and open a US bank account to receive funding. And it had planned something special for the announcement video, an amusing fourth-wall-breaking skit, which begins with protagonists George and Nico in conversation, with Cecil appearing in the game world as himself before appealing to backers. "It was fun," Carmody says, "but it involved a lot of research."

The gambit worked: the campaign reached a third of its target within the first day, which put Revolution in a better position to approach other funders. "We had proof of a dedicated fanbase, which gave them a lot of confidence," she adds.

Development wasn't without its hitches – the game was delayed once, and then released in two parts – but the community was supportive. Revolution's candour and responsiveness to feedback played a part, but Carmody was still pleasantly surprised to find backers leaping to the studio's defence at what was a troubled time for Kickstarter projects. "I think it was mostly the media who were saying, 'Oh, another game that hasn't come out when it promised,' but our fans

"OUR FANS ARE CONVINCED THAT THE DA VINCI CODE MUST HAVE TAKEN INSPIRATION FROM BROKEN SWORD"

said they would prefer to wait for the best we could give them, and that was fantastic."

Revolution has endured significant upheaval during its 25 years. Yet in some ways it's now in a similar position to when it started out. Three of the four co-founders are still at the company – David Sykes is no longer involved in development but retains his shareholding – forming a small core team that continues to seek talented individuals to collaborate with. "It was a huge pleasure to see Dave Gibbons again recently," Cecil teases, "and talk about the possibility of working with him on a game." Whatever the immediate future holds, Cecil insists Revolution can count itself "tremendously fortunate" to still be a part of the videogame industry. After a quarter-century of broken swords and steel skies, its fans would surely argue that they're the lucky ones. ■
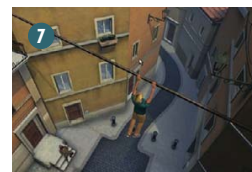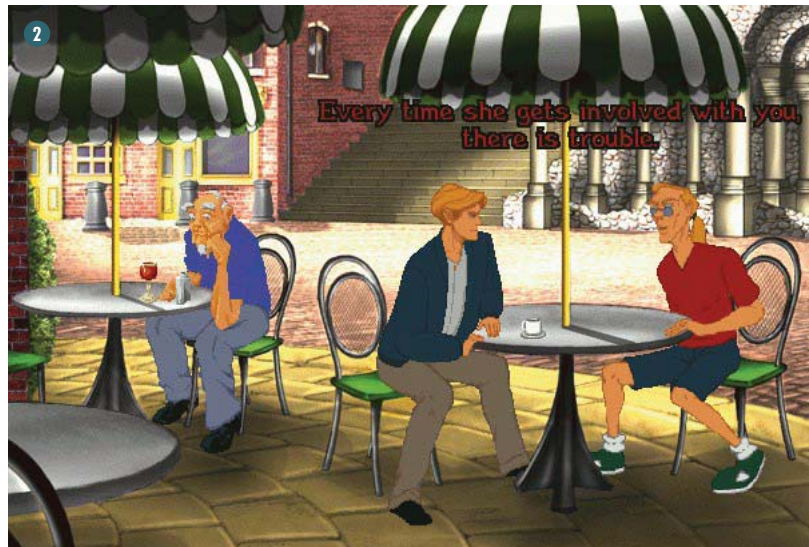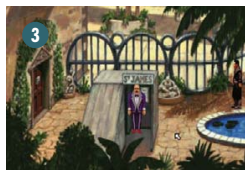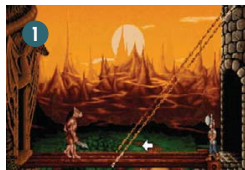
① *Lure Of The Temptress* was the first game to use the Virtual Theatre engine.
② Virgin Interactive, concerned that the point-and-click was growing obsolete, only agreed to publish *Broken Sword 2* if it could be completed in a year.
③ In a recent meeting, Dave Gibbons admitted to Charles Cecil that he wasn't fond of *Beneath A Steel Sky*'s title.
④ The community formed a guild named Order Of The Goat in recognition of *Broken Sword's* most obtuse puzzle.
⑤ Cecil says *The Sleeping Dragon*'s 3D spilt the fanbase.
⑥ The espionage-themed *In Cold Blood* was a cult hit.
⑦ Sumo Digital helped to make *The Angel Of Death*.
⑧ It's unlikely that *Broken Sword 5* will be the last we see of George and Nico
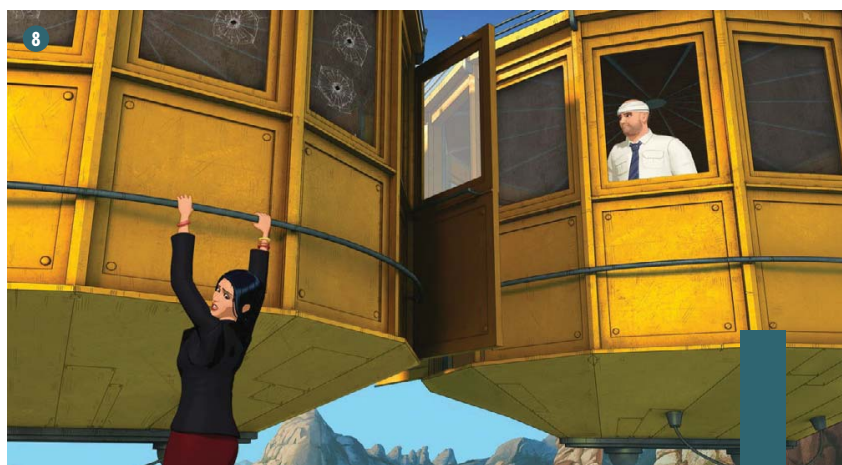
PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

Destiny: The Taken King PS4
With Bungie rumoured to be ditching paid DLC in favour of cosmetic IAP, it must find new ways to keep players on the hook. Its work to date has been exceptional, with a steady flow of events and hidden exotic weapons. Just as the pace seemed to be dipping, a masterful Halloween event arrived. When we were done with that, Trials Of Osiris returned. Great stuff, but we need to be playing other things right now. Bungie, can you dial it back a bit?

DriveClub Bikes iOS
A year since launch, *DriveClub* remains one of the most beautiful and thrilling racing games out there, and now you can zip around its picturesque tracks on terrifyingly powerful bikes thanks to Evolution's latest update. The machines look, sound and feel fantastic, squirming under acceleration and screaming as you open the throttle, while new events require you to pull wheelies and endos for points.

Until Dawn PS4
As the nights draw in, we revisit some bad choices in Supermassive's thriller. While a few jump scares have lost their power for being expected, tracing new pathways and trying to prevent unnecessary bloodshed is still a nervy task, especially with a seasonal pumpkin hunt to get us scouring the dark corners we might otherwise avoid. Steady-handed experience still can't prevent a few gory ends, either, fresh what-ifs unfurling like the butterfly wings that mock us so.

Import games provided for review by Hong Kong store **www.play-asia.com**

Cabbies hate this weird trick

Come out of St Pancras, turn right, take the first left, head straight down, and you'll be at Piccadilly Circus in seconds. Wait, what? *Assassin's Creed*'s trip to Ye Olde London has long been rumoured, and the idea has always been appealing. We didn't expect the results to be quite so jarring, but on reflection it was always the logical consequence of a videogame taking for its setting a location you know like the back of your hand.

When Ubisoft stitched together *Assassin's Creed II*'s Florentine landmarks in its own way, we were none the wiser. To the tourist, a city is a collection of landmarks, their surroundings irrelevant on a whistle-stop tour of the most famous sights. In games, geography is a matter not of accuracy, but atmosphere, something *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (p112), despite its problems, has in spades.

So too does *Yakuza 5* (p114), which finally comes west this month and is, on first inspection, worlds apart from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. It's the latest game in a series that's a relative unknown in the west, arriving three years late on a now-unpopular console. It is, to put it politely, rough around the edges, certainly when put next to a big-budget Ubisoft project. Yet it, too, is steeped in the atmosphere of its setting.

The cynic might reasonably contend that this is a simple matter of logic: a game is always going to feel more true to its real-world setting if it's made by people who actually live and work there. But *Yakuza*'s greatest asset is stability. Because it's rooted in a single setting – the fictional Tokyo red light district of Kamurocho – we've come to know it like we know the route to Piccadilly Circus, and every new release feels like going home. Any Tokyo cabbies reading this will disagree, of course, but it's all a matter of perspective. Perhaps they'd like to take a trip to Victorian London.

Halo 5: Guardians

Halo 4's achievements were many. It was a proof of concept, for one thing, evidence that *Halo*'s new custodians at 343 Industries were capable of adding to the work of the series' real-life Forerunners at Bungie. It also demonstrated how *Halo*'s even-handed multiplayer might be recognisably retooled for today's progression-heavy, super-kinetic firstperson market. But above everything else, *Halo 4*'s most significant act was to give us Master Chief back. And in light of that, it seems careless of *Halo 5* to take him away again.

It feels like we've been here before. Perhaps it's a sequels thing — *Halo 2* wasn't the better for dividing its campaign missions between the Master Chief, Xbox icon John Wayne, and the Arbiter, an eight-foot alien who looks like a hairless Alsatian in a helmet. But 343 has repeated the mistake, with play time during *Halo 5*'s story — in which Master Chief goes looking for an off-reservation Cortana, and new Spartan Jameson Locke is ordered to pursue — similarly divided between era-defining hero and, well, the new guy.

The issue here isn't with being Locke — who's fine, if boring in a mandated-by-the-plot way — but in not being Master Chief. This narrative structuring puts us outside him, makes us dubious of his intentions, even pits us against him, all while we wait impatiently to be him again, because *Halo* is the story of being a stoic green superman with big guns. It's a miscalculation that gives the campaign a stop-start momentum, Locke's missions like an out-of-the-body-we'd-like-to-have experience that, despite their various merits, are tempting to rush through to rejoin the main event.

And they do have merits. *Halo 5* is a beautiful game, filled with imaginative sci-fi staging: elegant alien shorelines; architecture burrowed into cliff faces and other sloping geologicals; and dazzling expansive interiors. The Covenant Elite homeworld of Sanghelios is a particular highlight, with slow, heavy waves sulking beneath a cold, bright sun as Locke and his fireteam rush across a series of raised platforms as they crumble into the sea. In fact the only complaint about the places in which *Halo 5* puts us is they sometimes seem almost too *Halo*, in combination with the moving-target narrative strategy of there always being something just out of reach. There's always another polished corridor to run along, another angular dais to climb, another doorway to open — an exaggerated geometry that, towards the end, extends and unfolds into self-parody.

While *Halo 5* sometimes feels too *Halo*, 343 is also nudging its aesthetic in another direction. The studio's big contribution to the series are the Prometheans, a robot-and-light race of digitised ancient humans who serve as a sort of flashmob army for the now not-so mysterious Forerunners. While the Prometheans' expanding, floating metallic style was a refreshing addition to *Halo 4*, the Flood being the Platonic ideal

Publisher Microsoft
Developer 343 Industries
Format Xbox One
Release Out now

Given an impossible brief — make combat feel fast and fresh while retaining that intangible Halo feel — it delivers

of a demon ex in this regard, another game in their company stretches their welcome.

There's something insubstantial about them and their weapons. There's a lack of feedback in the firing, with light rifles that feel as effective as turning a torch on enemies, and a lack of feedback in being fired upon, with the soldier class in particular insubstantial to the point where it's not always clear if a shot has registered. Perhaps worst of all, the Promethean grunt class are essentially robot dogs. Some encounters involve dozens of these enemies appearing and rushing at once; whatever your vision of the experiences that Xbox's flagship system-shifter might deliver this time, joylessly exterminating a pack of mechanical canines was probably not high on the list.

But *Halo 5* is new in different ways. After tentative tinkering with the game's movement system — *Halo*, more than the vast majority of shooters, is characterised by a gloriously steady feel — *Halo 5* has settled on something new but substantial. Sprinting is unlimited, and low-level walls can be grabbed and clambered over. There's no wall-running, but there is a short boost that can shunt your Spartan sideways, forward or back, chain with melee attacks, and keep Spartans hovering for a short time while smart-link aiming (read: aiming down sights). Put together it makes for a muscular, satisfying cycle of options offering varied pace and power that recognises the trajectory of the firstperson shooter but doesn't abandon the Chief's steady stride.

The inclusion of Fireteams alongside our two protagonists also changes the game's shape and feel. Rather than plucky bands of NPC grunts riding shotgun and proving their expendability during what became unofficial escort missions (tiny heartbreaks with each avoidable death), *Halo 5*'s Fireteams — Chief has Blue, Locke has Osiris — act like AI co-op companions rather than glorified hood ornaments.

It's a shifting of priority, in that *Halo* has always felt like a singleplayer blockbuster it was possible to play with friends, clumsily stitching in another Master Chief. But *Halo 5*, as though feeling the press of *Destiny*'s persistent co-op Striking and Raiding, gives character and space to your friends even when they're not playing. The campaign environments are designed accordingly — filled with frequent open spaces that lack a single narrow path — but moreover this is a root-and-branch reaction to the way we play shooters now: socially, repeatedly, there to see each other as much as the game itself. It's an approach which has also found its way into *Halo 5*'s competitive multiplayer.

In fact, that competitive multiplayer is a significant achievement. Given an impossible brief — make combat feel fast and fresh like newer shooters while retaining that intangible classic *Halo* feel — it delivers, with ▶
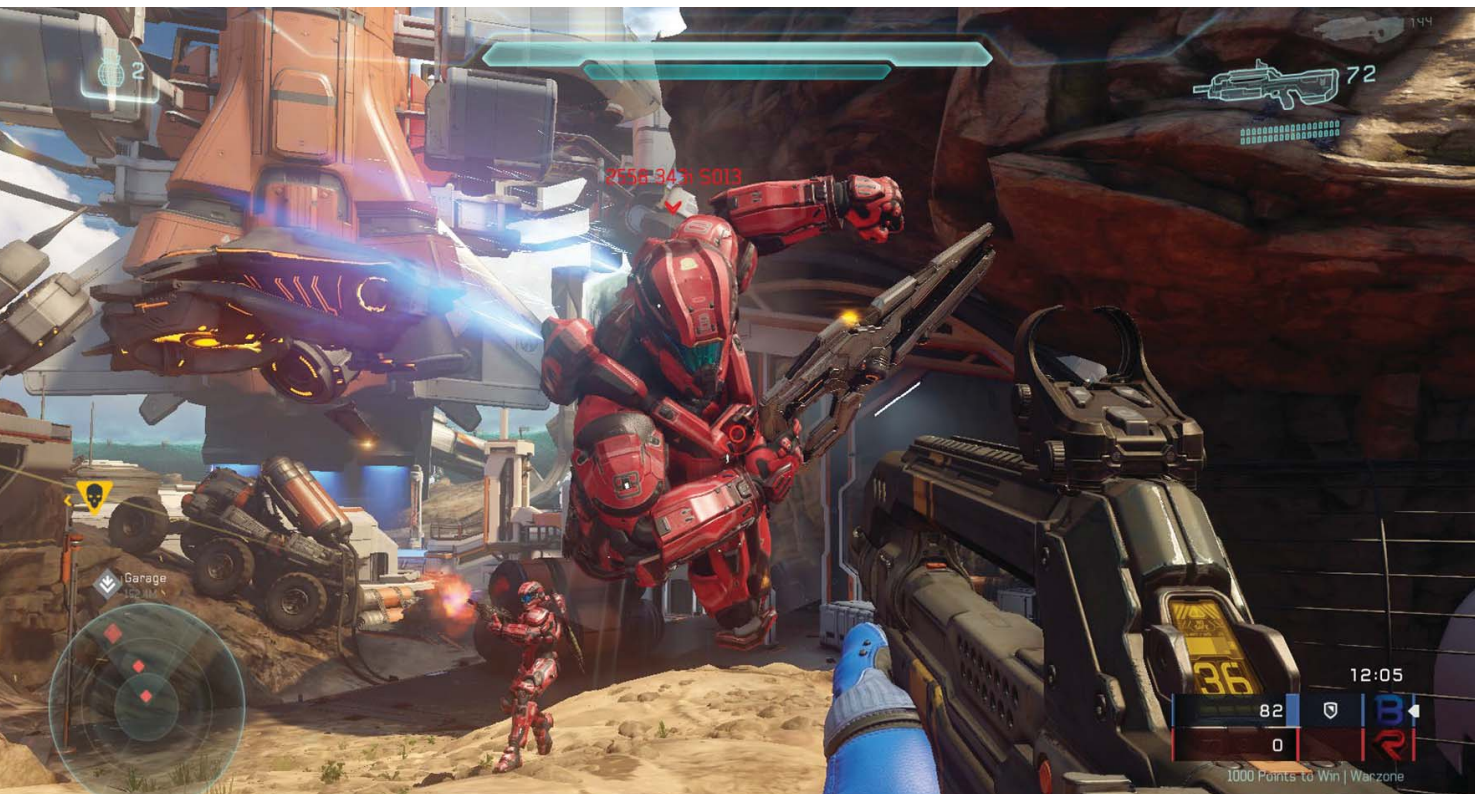
ABOVE The new manoeuvrability options replace Armour Abilities, and re-inject a sense of balanced competitiveness to multiplayer – they can be skilfully deployed, but are never totally disruptive.
LEFT One old issue that raises its head in *Halo 5* is a tendency for the best bits of action – an opening mountain-side raid, the face-off between Locke and Master Chief – to happen during the cutscenes

BELOW Promethean Knights, with weakspots on each shoulder revealing a central core, are the most satisfying of the light-based and dog-heavy race to dismantle
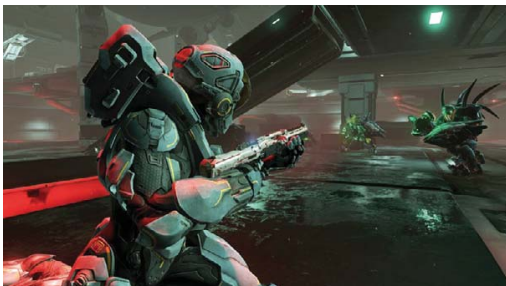
ABOVE The new suite of thrusters on Spartans' armour never makes itself more useful during the campaign than when you're fighting against enemies – like old favourites, the Hunters – that wield big, slow weapons

what's clearly a carefully considered two-way approach. Arena is a stripped-down set of playlists and houses the purists' version of *Halo* multiplayer. There are no loadouts and no armour or manoeuvrability powerups, just two sets of Spartans competing for control of a map and its power weapons using strategy and adept movement. It's a response to a creeping sense of drift, the feeling that as *Halo* modernised with armour abilities, sprinting and killstreaks from *Reach* onwards, it was losing something essential to itself. Here the decision's been made that *Halo* can't be two things at once, but it can be them at separate times. So Arena has standard starting weapons and skill-ranked matches and it feels, even with the new movement system, like an old version of *Halo* that never really existed, leaving *Halo 5*'s other multiplayer pillar, Warzone, to be as new and un-*Halo* as it likes.

While Arena is clean and balanced, it does still count towards your overall progression, earning you requisition packs that can be opened and deployed in Warzone. This requisition system is an advanced version of the small tactical decisions permitted in *Halo 4*, now an entire microtransaction economy, with similarities to *Advanced Warfare*'s Supply Drops. It gives players the ability to redeem cards (collected by opening randomised packs) for power weapons, armour powerups, XP boosts and even vehicles.

The reason this doesn't turn into a pay-to-win free-for-all is that Warzone is a carefully managed Big Team mode, a maximum of 24 players fighting for control of territories and bases. Requisitions become available in stages, with more powerful cards only playable as the battle progresses to stop an opening surge of resources

FILLION IN THE GAPS
The Master Chief remains faceless in *Halo 5*, and why not? In a firstperson universe where players can't see your face anyway, earning a brand-boosting notoriety for it is something of a coup. But the introduction of a rival Spartan fireteam does offer a new way of negotiating the process of character-player identification. We play as Locke, a flavourless avatar, but we can *see* Nathan Fillion, whose character, Edward Buck, is a long-term *Halo* fixture now promoted to 'that guy whose face you see all the time'. In a series as committed to heroic anonymity, Fillion's face is a big deal – he's not quite as funny as he gets to be in *Destiny*, where he plays robotic Vanguard Cayde-6, but when you can look into his eyes, that's not the point.

Big Team multiplayer mode Warzone features multistage maps with bases surrounding a contestable structure. Destroying the enemy core is one of the ways of racking up a win, or your team of 12 can shoot for 1,000 points

swaying matches immediately. But the balance is also innate, because the size of the match population means even powerful cards have to be used skilfully to make an impression. The economy of cards and strategies will only settle post-release, but it seems more common cards — basic and even heavy weapons — drop regularly enough that all players will have a ready supply, so it will take coordination and ability, not merely spending power, to frequently shift the odds in your favour.

Warzone is also remarkable for its mix of PVP and PVE components. The huge scale of its maps give it room to deploy enemy champions of varying toughness that sit as optional targets available for both Spartan teams. These champions offer potentially game-turning points and so engineer the kind of encounter *Destiny* seemed to once promise but never quite delivered — enemy human teams in loose and treacherous coalition at the site of a significant AI threat. The fights that happen under and around these champions as they near death, each side waiting for the moment to focus fully on the NPC prize, are new and excellent.

But they also pose the question of whether this is enough. Leaving the campaign aside — it is, in the tradition of the series, a fractured anticlimax — *Halo 5*'s multiplayer is both faithful and re-energised. But it also represents a partial implementation of the kind of persistent play and compulsive design *Destiny*, after a year of its own tinkering, now has a firm handle on. *Halo 5* is full of good decisions and fantastic multiplayer experiences, but in trying to catch up, it might have shown how far behind it really is.

8

Post Script

Halo 5's movement updates restore the balance of earlier games

Halo 5's movement system represents the most concerted and fundamental overhaul of the series' base mechanics since it began in 2001. It's a significant step, if only because the success of *Halo*, more than most shooters, has been founded on its perfectly judged motion and aiming. Since the start, the way Master Chief has moved through the world and zeroes in on enemies has been a mix of meticulousness and luxury. It is just so, a feedback loop of pleasure akin to that of steering a perfectly balanced car, or watching an oiled chain glide over gears, the satisfaction of interacting with a tuned and efficient machine.

Initially, the Chief couldn't sprint — unlikely for an augmented supersoldier, but an absence that gifted *Halo* a sense of calm and steadiness. Field expertise in multiplayer combat was hard won, a matter of knowing the maps and their occasional shortcuts. The only masterable skill was the game's crouch jump, a way of tucking the Chief's legs into his body at the apex of a jump to reach higher ledges, a rough-cut back door into advanced manoeuvrability.

This movement system impressed a particular shape onto the series' geometric design. The multiplayer arenas for the first three *Halo* games are dominated by flat surfaces, squares and ramps. They are, at the small and personal end away from the vehicular combat, intricate solid mazes of layers, exits and just-jumpable distances. Cold Storage, Lockout, Guardian, Epitaph: all are beautifully executed pieces of architecture that mesh with a set of movement parameters that dictates steady speed and heavy gravity, producing the classic, elegant combat for which *Halo* is known.

Then, with *Halo*: *Reach*, the system changed. It's tough to stay standing still, even elegantly, and the enormous impact of 2007's *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* made breathless, frantic combat an industry default. *Reach* reacted with the introduction of Armour Abilities, powerups that included movement augmentations such as a limited dash, jetpack boosting and an evasive roll. *Halo 4* then made the sprinting a permanent fixture and also retained jetpacks and a thruster boost for dodging as Abilities.

With the arrival of *Halo 5*'s more thoroughly redesigned movement system, it's now clear that this was *Halo* in crisis. By breaking up the uniformity of manoeuvrability, *Reach* and *Halo 4* disrupted the core of *Halo*'s multiplayer, which had up to this point been about map control. Sprinting effectively shrank the size of maps, but only for certain players, while jetpacks rewrote the rules of vertical engagement. Those solid mazes could be bypassed with a button press, and the critical skill of reading *Halo*'s radar, interpreting 3D space and anticipating enemy movement using a 2D

indicator was lost. What was gained seemed to be speed for speed's sake — more dashing about and energy, but no system to make it meaningful.

The console shooter is now post-*Call Of Duty*, in as much as the effect of *Modern Warfare*'s haste and directness has settled into something like a new consensus. *Titanfall*, built by the key creative minds behind *Modern Warfare*, repopularised mixing double-jumps and wall running into the FPS moveset. It was a liberation of the pad-steered firstperson soldier, no longer condemned to dash along the ground until dead. *Advanced Warfare*'s Exo Suit made *Titanfall*'s flirtation with freerunning seem less like an exception and more like the new standard, before *Halo*'s old masters at Bungie confirmed it with *Destiny*, a game that interprets vertical movement as variously double-jumping, triple-jumping, hovering, and blinking. The top tier of the console firstperson shooter genre is now as much about moving as it is about shooting.

Which has always been true, of course, and *Halo* has known since the beginning. And in *Halo 5*, the series once again has a system that reflects that truth and measures up to the competition. *Halo 5*'s Spartans can sprint forever, clamber up chest-high ledges, and boost dash in any direction. Their new thrusters also enable them to slam to the ground from a jump, hover momentarily while aiming, and shoulder charge. This moveset is uniform, unlike the old Armour Abilities, preserving *Halo*'s level playing field and, crucially, making it possible to design maps around one set of traversal abilities. The space around the combat is once again tuned specifically to the parameters of possible movement within that space, and as a result *Halo 5*'s Arena maps look again like Lockout and Guardian — square-cut geometry for skilled, vertically restrained battle — and Arena is again a tussle for map control.

Best of all, nothing about the system feels like a shortcut. Clambering and the boosting are ways of making movement more fluid, but — like the crouch jump, and unlike the jetpack — they are still locked to an essential, reassuring gravity. *Halo 5* is tactile, and it never feels as though we are disengaged from the ring of heavy boots stomping through its metal corridors. Rather than a flyaway abstraction, there is a dexterous pleasure to mastering the new manoeuvrability options, chaining boosts and sprints, jumps and climbs. And so, like the multiplayer at large, it feels as though 343 has done a remarkable thing, giving us a *Halo* that lives up to the demands of the marketplace in which it finds itself, and yet delivers an allusive feeling of a game we once knew. The Chief moves better than ever, and yet somehow feels just like he always has. ■

> Halo 5 is tactile; we never feel disengaged from the ring of boots stomping through its metal corridors

Guitar Hero Live

Just ten years after the series' inception, its title finally fits. What's changed? Your perspective, shifting from some spectral boom arm loitering just offstage to standing on the boards and looking out onto a crowd of thousands. Initially at least, this also convincingly instils a little of the stage fright that must come with facing down so many expectant bodies. In the absence of a full ensemble of plastic-instrument-wielding friends, it's the next closest thing to feeling like you're playing in a real band, but *Guitar Hero Live*'s jaw-droppingly clever film work has been built in service of placing you, and you alone, centre stage.

Play well and the crowd — along with your digital bandmates — will prove an encouraging influence. Fumble too many notes thanks to your sweaty, nervous hands and you'll incite the disapproval of a baying, projectile-hurling crowd. Even full water bottles don't sting as keenly as your drummer refusing to make eye contact and shaking his head in abject disappointment, though. The transition between these extremes is masked with a quick, though hardly subtle, camera blur, which can occasionally throw up some jarring changes of heart from those around you. It's easy to win the fans back if lost — especially if you activate Hero Power, *Live*'s take on Star Power, either by tilting the guitar or reaching for an awkwardly placed button. That tendency to flip-flop, however, means you'll face some extremely fickle crowds while acclimatising to the new setup.

There's variance in bands' performances, too, although great care has gone into ensuring each member correctly mimes every note, beat and word of the song you're playing. The effect is a stunning upgrade over the fuzzier interpretations of the polygonal marionettes that fronted earlier *Guitar Hero* entries, but depending on where you fall in the spectrum of regular gig attendee to regular X-Factor viewer, the cast's practised expertise is somewhat undermined by an excess of earnest enthusiasm, which makes it all feel a little sanitised. Not all of the performers are a natural fit for the songs they belt out either, and you'll regularly be exposed to the kind of cringe-inducing backstage pep talks we imagine some teenage pop singers happily submit to before graduating to a career of drug-fuelled Instagram nudity. But while events and performances might not always ring true, this drama-school take on touring life is certainly no more cheesy than somebody leaping around their living room with a plastic guitar stung around their neck.

Not that you'll have much time to analyse the cast's acting chops while the music's playing. Despite the new firstperson viewpoint, you spend most of your time with your attention once again riveted on the familiar note highway at the centre of the screen as it spools all manner of unfamiliar combinations towards you. All those new icons and formations are a result of *Guitar Hero Live*'s second big innovation: a new guitar that arranges six buttons into two rows of three. The new design ensures that even in the moments when you're not convinced you're at a real gig, you'll feel like you're playing something akin to a real guitar. The six-button arrangement allows developer FreeStyle a remarkable amount of variation, making barre chords, power chords, hammer-ons and pull-offs feel pleasingly natural to guitarists, and solos particularly satisfying. The cost of this advance is that *Guitar Hero* vets will have to relearn their craft, but it also makes for a more natural jumping-off point for anyone inspired to pick up a real six-string after playing the game.

At its best, *Guitar Hero Live*'s redesigned peripheral will make you feel connected to the music in a way that a linear five-button setup can't, and makes for a more meaningful difficulty curve as you progress from simple strumming to just the lower three buttons and then onto the game's raft of new shapes. It's hard to go back after trying it, but the loud clack of the strum bar will make some players wish they could splice in the new *Rock Band* guitar's quieter guts. This more complex design has provided FreeStyle with a fresh challenge when marking up songs, too, and the initial selection of tracks feels inconsistent — at least on the standard difficulty — when it comes to the level of challenge on offer. Songs such as The Joy Formidable's Whirring or Bruno Mars' Lazy present repetitive, easily aced patterns, while others chuck in daunting difficulty spikes halfway through that feel more like Advanced sequences. Still others feel disconnected from the music entirely — playing Bob Dylan's Thunder On The Mountain or Disturbed's Down With The Sickness on Regular difficulty feels like you're fighting the music to follow a loosely related onscreen transcription. Upping the difficulty to Advanced in these cases reconnects your fingers and the music, but the leap in complexity requires no small amount of additional talent. More worryingly, we quite often found the guitar line we were meant to be following was too low in the mix, occasionally even inaudible. Asking a bad-tempered sound engineer to dial up your output in the monitor really has no part in the rock god fantasy.

Thankfully, among the initial offering of more than 200 songs, there are many more examples that work than don't. Yes, the fact the likes of the aforementioned Bruno Mars and One Direction feature among more credible guitar icons will prove divisive, but it's clear evidence of *Live*'s broad target demographic. The absence of flames and barbed wire from the logo is no accident either — FreeStyle wants everybody to be able to find something that will appeal to them, whether that's honouring Joe Satriani's requirement that every bar have at least three times as many notes as are ▶

> Live's jaw-droppingly clever film work has been built in service of placing you, and you alone, centre stage

RIGHT "If Lamb Of God is being played repeatedly by everyone," says Jackson of the game's flexible library on the GHTV channels, "then we'll put more Lamb Of God in!" **BELOW** While the streaming music channels offer plenty of videos in which bands mime in wind tunnels, you'll also play along to more abstract backdrops too. **MAIN** FreeStyle toyed with the idea of making the new guitar's strum bar quieter, but found that most players like the positive feedback of its chunky click
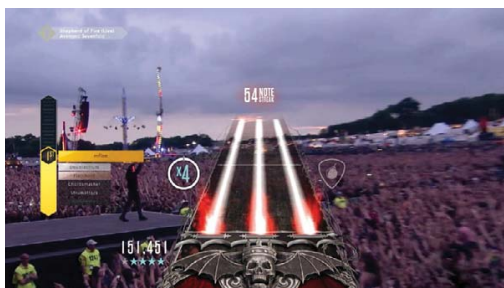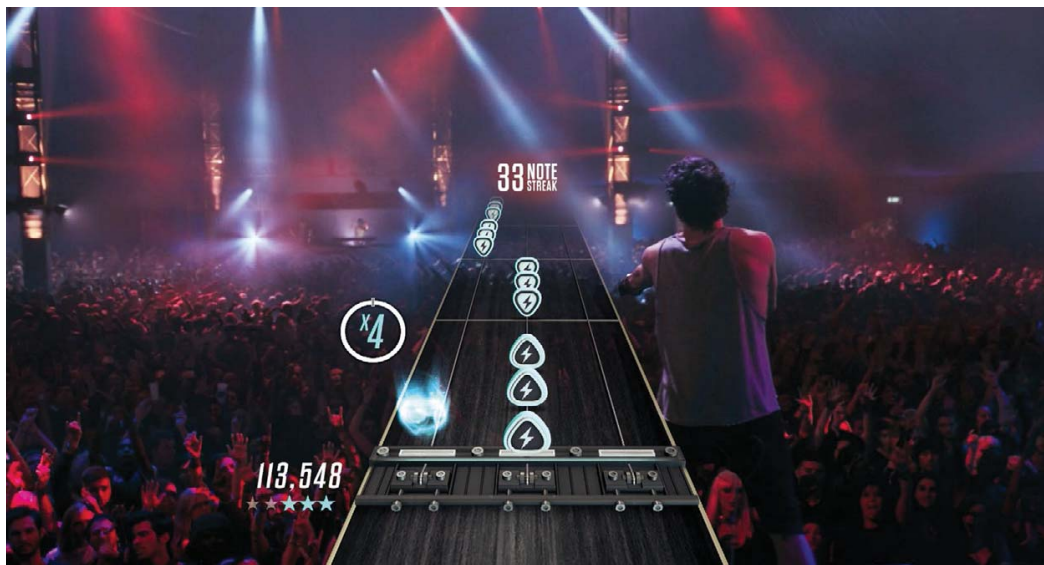
ABOVE The Premium Events may not deliver the clever camera trickery of the game's pre-recorded gigs to chart the crowd's reaction, but arguably they do deliver a greater sense of getting involved with a real band

40 NOTE STREAK

x4

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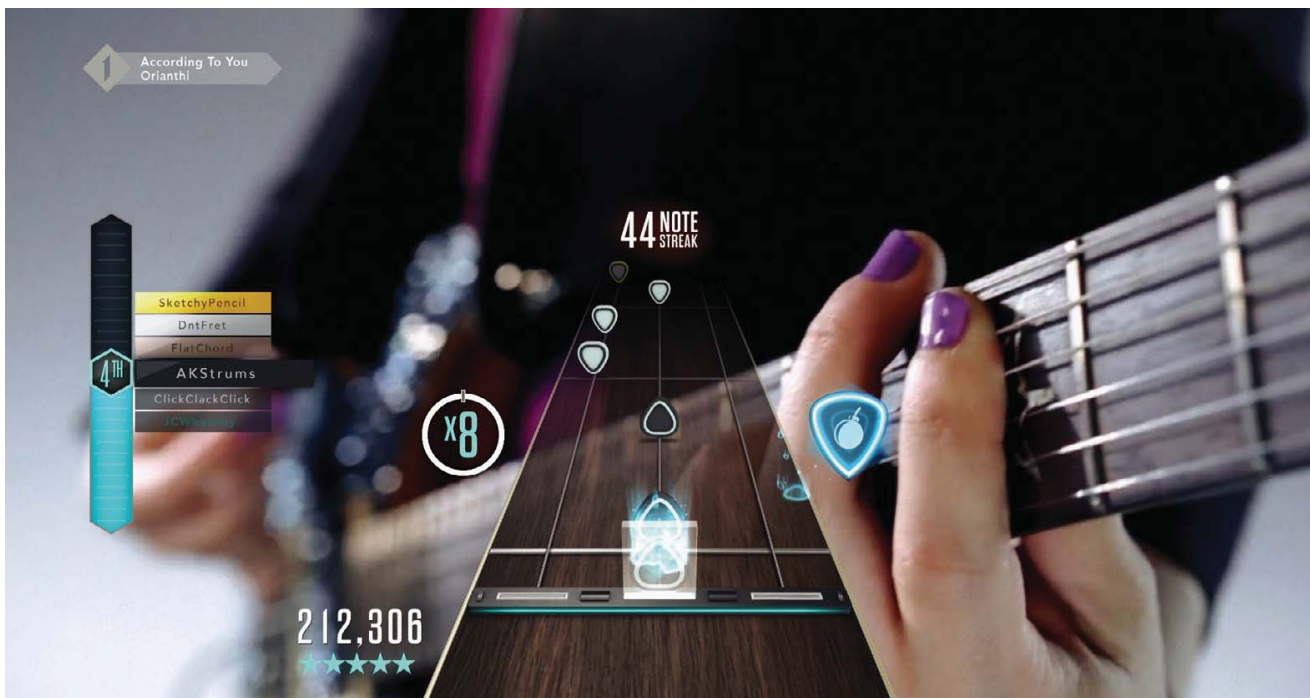
strictly speaking necessary, or simply strumming along to a Passenger anthem. We're still not convinced that Skrillex's inclusion makes any sense at all, however.

But any misgivings with the playlist are quickly quashed by *Guitar Hero*'s most brilliant addition: GHTV, a streaming service that feels like the offspring of '90s music television. GHTV offers you a choice of genre-themed channels (pop and metal at launch, with more to follow) that play music videos 24 hours a day, its library thematically subdivided into 30- or 60-minute 'programmes'. Only occasionally does GHTV take a break from the onslaught of fresh music to throw in an arty, charismatic ident. Every song you play pits your performance against a group of other players who have been judged by the matchmaking algorithms to be of similar ability, and at the end you'll be presented with a leaderboard. There are also global leaderboards to look at if you want to compare your finger work to the world's best. While FreeStyle places its filmed gigs front and centre, it's the constantly shifting GHTV that will provide *Guitar Hero Live*'s real longevity, the developer promising a continuously updated library that will shape itself around the whims of players, and dispenses with the notion of paid-for DLC tracks.

In their place, the game allows you to spend Play Tokens on firing up your favourite tracks on demand, rather than wait for them to come up in rotation on whichever channel you're tuned in to. You earn Tokens every time you level up, and you can buy them in packs using the coins earned from playing songs or with real money. They're handed out at such a generous rate, however, that in over 20 hours, we've yet to come up short or find ourselves needing to spend any type of currency on them, real or otherwise. In the initial rush

POWER CHORD
As you level up, you'll unlock powerups to use while you play. The buffs replace Hero Power (and are activated with either a tilt or reaching around to the button that spans the bridge just behind the strum bar) and have been designed to ease your path to Expert difficulty – a journey most players gave up on previously. The first of these is a bomb that clears all the notes onscreen for a short time, but it's soon joined by powers that temporarily raise or lower the difficulty of a song, give you a 2x multiplier or offer a safety net that preserves your multiplier if you stumble. In addition to these temporary modifiers, you can upgrade your guitar, which permanently increases the value of every note, your maximum multiplier, and how many powerups you can amass at once.

of working your way through the starter library, levelling up as you go, you'll likely amass more Play Tokens than you know what to do with.

For particularly committed players, and those having friends round, there's also the option of the Party Pass, which gives you access to every song in the GHTV catalogue for 24 hours for £3.99. It's a paywall that feels less generous than the rest of the package, but if you're happy to just play along to FreeStyle's channel programming, you can do so at no extra cost.

As well as the streaming channels, there are Premium Shows, which give you access to newly added content early, or are tied to real-world concerts — the first of these being three Avenged Sevenfold songs from their 2014 Download set. You can unlock them either by spending *Live*'s premium currency, Hero Cash, or by getting a three-star rating or higher on three specific songs. Ranking high in a Premium Show's leaderboard will net you all manner of multipliers that will be applied to a number of your subsequent performances.

FreeStyle's greatest achievement is that it's made the rhythm-action genre feel fresh again, creating a game that's as raw and exciting as the series' debut. Like a stage diver, *Guitar Hero Live* commits wholly to the unknown in the hope there will still be an audience to support it after the leap, and that unguarded bravery results in a few bum notes. But you'll barely notice them in the heat of the moment, and the game consistently reminds you why you first picked up a plastic guitar all those years ago.

9

Post Script

Interview: **Jamie Jackson**, creative director and co-studio head, FreeStyle Games

FreeStyle Games' creative director, **Jamie Jackson**, has carved out a drastically different route for the studio's first shot at helming the *Guitar Hero* series, but that's little surprise. This, after all, is the company that gave the world *DJ Hero* when plastic guitars reigned supreme. Here, he tells us why FreeStyle went back to the drawing board for *Guitar Hero Live*.

You're clearly going for broad appeal, but are Skrillex and Eminem a step too far for *Guitar Hero*?
Early on in development, I set rules for the team: do not use the old logo, barbed wire or flames. Let's just try to start with a cleanish slate. So we went through a phase where we just tried marking up weird shit, and treated *Guitar Hero* as a rhythm-action game that happens to have a guitar controller. So the Skrillex track was just this one we marked up early on. And you're absolutely right, there's no guitar in it, but we came at it as, 'What if you were playing some kind of synth guitar in this track? Could it be fun?' I really enjoy playing that track. I feel quite connected to the music even though it's not guitar, but it's got a good groove to it and it creates a bit of fun at that point. If you hate Skrillex, it's not going to do that. But I was at the launch thing in LA and I ended up playing the Eminem track against this girl who just wanted to go head-to-head. And we had a right laugh — it was really funny, and somebody else was trying to rap, which was even funnier. And what happened was there was this great *Guitar Hero* moment where you're with your mates and trying to pretend you're in a rock band. So that was what drove us to put it in.

How did you go about balancing the powerups to allow different types of player to compete?
We're going to be launching new game modes into GHTV, which I can't talk about too much yet, but they're going to be reasons for competitive players to get into more competitive gaming. And the powerups are really going to come into their own there, because it will give people that edge. But a lot of the powerups were designed to allow people to build their own strategies in-game. The bomb one, for example: at my level, I can play Advanced and then some Expert, so I often pick the bomb when I'm playing Expert tracks, because I know I'm going to drop my note streak if I hit a guitar solo, but it allows me to protect my streak a little bit. Other times, if I know I can nail the song, I'm going to use the 2x multiplier. It's all about letting players level up, have a metagame, and really feeding that competition for those who really want it.

Were you worried about dropping the DLC model?
Yes and no. The old DLC model, it didn't really work for

"I remember watching MTV as a kid, and that's how I found my music. GHTV is definitely about discovery"

the entire fanbase, and that reflected in the amount of people who used DLC in the game. But at the same time, DLC as a pipeline for content is, I guess, the expected delivery method in the game industry at the moment. Or perhaps it was and that's changing. Five years ago, [Internet]-connected consoles worldwide were about 40 per cent of the total, whereas today it's about 90 per cent. Which is huge, and it means that we can get content to our players in a different way. For *Guitar Hero*, the content is music, and to be able to give people music quickly and efficiently was what was important to us. Plus, I guess we're all of that age where we grew up on MTV and miss those days a bit. And it's about music discovery, because I remember watching MTV as a kid, and that's how I found my music; GHTV is definitely about discovery.

High-score-chasing players are likely to want to replay tracks a lot. How did you balance the Play Token system to not penalise dedicated players?
The whole premise of GHTV was to let people try stuff without spending money. If they really want to play [specific] things, they can spend money, but equally we're going to give them free stuff as well. I feel that when people get into it, they're going to realise that it's been balanced pretty well. I think out of the box, you're getting around nine hours of play what you want, how you want if you just play averagely. Which is quite a lot when you think that you're averaging three minutes and 20 seconds a song. And you can keep playing and keep building those tokens up. I think that the people who want to ace the game, they're also the people who will play it a lot more than anyone else, so arguably they're going to build up a lot more in-game currency anyway.

In the tutorial, your roadie refers to the lower buttons as "bottom strings", whereas guitarists know these as top strings. How did you approach balancing realism with accessibility?
You've picked the thing that caused the most arguments in the office, for exactly that reason! And this debate went on for months. I ended up becoming the mediator between our design team and everyone who plays guitar. And I ended up having to make the call. But everyone who plays guitar — and we've got quite a lot of them in our office — came to see me and was like, "You can't do it this way; it doesn't make guitar sense". And then the design team's like, "We know it's not the right way, but everyone who doesn't play guitar won't understand it, because to everyone else up is up and down is down". That debate raged for ages and we ended up going with... I guess what we feel is that we're not making a guitar simulator, we're making a rhythm-action game. ■

Life Is Strange

Publisher Square Enix
Developer Dontnod Entertainment
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
(version tested)
Release Out now

Are you sitting comfortably? Maybe you should be. For all the cliffhangers and surprises that saw a seemingly modest teen drama grow into one of the most talked-about games of 2015, one of its most quietly revelatory moments is the first time it asks you to take a load off. Games rarely offer a direct invitation to take stock, let alone an incentive. Stop for a moment and you might witness the strangely touching sight of a darting, shifting murmuration, or hear a gentle melody fading in over an Instagram sunset as protagonist Max's inner monologue reveals her most private thoughts and feelings. From the player's point of view, it's valuable time to reflect: to consider choices made — and occasionally unmade — and to wonder what might be around the corner.

Whatever your guess, it's probably wrong. *Life Is Strange* delights in confounding its players. If that's occasionally at the cost of narrative consistency, its disparate pieces still slot more neatly together than you might expect for a game in which the heroine has the power to manipulate time, and the plot takes in elements of murder mystery, horror and detective thriller. If the odd twist is telegraphed, you're sure to be blindsided at least once or twice. These are resounding, occasionally unsettling shocks, though they don't linger quite so long in the mind as some of the smaller, quieter moments. It's not a criticism to say *Life Is Strange* is often at its most affecting when you're doing very little.

What's all the more remarkable is that it remains so spellbinding in the face of problems that would torpedo almost any other narrative-led game. The lip-syncing in close-up shots is dreadful, while the dialogue — stuffed with Tumblrspeak and on-the-nose references, particularly in the early episodes — often misses the mark, even if the performances are good. In the late game, there's a torrent of exposition that would shame a Bond villain, while a laborious junkyard fetchquest in the second episode is such a glaring misjudgment that Dontnod sees fit to poke fun at it during the finale. There are plot holes large and small, and inconsistencies in the implementation of Max's powers that make less and less sense the more you dwell on them.

All of this certainly shouldn't be ignored, and yet there is something rare and precious in the way *Life Is Strange* represents the highs and lows of adolescence, particularly in the way it evokes the very essence of a friendship between two young women. This shouldn't be quite such a novelty, and yet it undoubtedly is in the interactive space. Spiky and obstinate, Chloe is a realistically flawed creation, and a terrific foil to the more hesitant, diffident Max. It's a relationship subtly shaped by your choices. Their journey's destination may be heavily foreshadowed — as inexorable as the approaching storm that threatens to consume the coastal town of Arcadia Bay — but it can be nuanced.

There is something rare and precious in the way Life Is Strange represents the highs and lows of adolescence

For some, Max and Chloe will fast become inseparable. Others may be less prepared to take the blame for Chloe's pot smoking, or unwilling to intervene when she fights with her stepfather. Max's meddling most often appears to be altruistically motivated, but at times it seems she's rewinding the clock purely out of self-interest. Again, that depends partly on the decisions you take, but also your own interpretation of events.

It's easy to empathise with her dilemmas. We've all had good times we wished to revisit and experiences that we wanted to last forever. In Max's obsession with photography, we see the very human desire to capture a time and place so that we might be able to somehow give the transient a sense of permanence. And if at times Dontnod tilts close to overwrought melodrama, that's only fitting given the heightened state of emotion we all experience as teens. *Life Is Strange* manages to evoke an identifiable sense of adolescent yearning, such that it generates a kind of vicarious nostalgia; it may express itself awkwardly, but the feelings that bubble to the surface are raw and real. Think back to how that swirl of raging hormones made us believe every choice we made was of seismic significance, and suddenly that encroaching tornado doesn't feel so far-fetched after all.

There's something of a contradiction in the way the story punishes Max for interfering with fate's designs as the game gleefully encourages us to wind back the clock. Yet whether we're moving back and forth in time to convince a friend we can see the future, or finding an inventive way past a locked door, Dontnod makes a familiar idea feel novel again. Meanwhile, on the occasions the power's used for a simple do-over, the context keeps you engaged: perhaps you're boosting the self-esteem of a classmate or deciding to punish a bully or not. The supporting cast might seem like archetypes, but over five episodes they're afforded depth, and your sympathies are likely to shift. It says much, for example, that some players see Max's friend Warren as a nice guy, and others would use the derogatory definition of that term. The lines they deliver may not always convince, but these characters behave like real people.

By the fifth episode, you'll be desperately hoping Dontnod sticks the landing, and it comes close to doing so, a few minor stumbles barely detracting from a string of memorable sequences that are daring, disturbing and nightmarish by turns. Although it repeats a trick, one heartbreaking rug-pull feels particularly cruel — and it's in this moment we realise just how fully we're invested in the outcome. This year has seen more tautly plotted, intelligently scripted narratives, but none that so expertly targets your heart. Like a Polaroid photograph, the quality of the image may leave something to be desired, but as a snapshot of a moment in time, there's truth captured within the frame.

8

RIGHT Dontnod's preference for indie folk won't be to all tastes, but the soundtrack fits the game's wistful tone and its occasional diegetic uses are well judged. **MAIN** *Life Is Strange*'s art might be stylised, but careful attention has been paid to environmental detail, while the way the action is framed suggests there's a few cineastes among the development team. **BOTTOM** Is fellow student Warren a useful nuisance or a genuine pest? After the bond between Max and Chloe, this is the relationship over which the player has most agency

ABOVE The fourth episode's pool party sequence could easily have slipped up but has a ring of authenticity: the music's too loud, and only a handful of those in attendance seem to be enjoying themselves unreservedly ▶

While many choices are swept away in the final one, the climax does play out a little differently based on your bond

Post Script

Why Life Is Strange's finale proved so divisive

The gambit was a bold one, but Dontnod clearly hoped that the climactic decision of *Life Is Strange*'s finale would split players — it did, after all, call the episode '*Polarized*'. The French studio might not, however, have anticipated that the episode itself would attract such opprobrium from certain quarters, especially after such a warm receptions for both *Episode 2: Out Of Time*, and *Episode 4: Dark Room*. If you don't wish to have any specifics spoiled, however, return to this page after you've played the series through to its conclusion.

Still, *Polarized* has done exactly what its title threatens, dividing *Life Is Strange*'s critics and playerbase. Some of the criticisms are easy to understand. It's hard to credit that anyone thought a forced stealth section, however brief and simple to complete, would be a good idea; likewise, that an opening exposition dump was a suitable way to explain the revelation of *Dark Room*'s cliffhanger ending. Otherwise, its perceived weaknesses can easily be interpreted as strengths.

Take, for example, its daring decision to disempower the player throughout. If Max isn't trapped in some way or other, helpless to change what's unfolding in front of her, then her abilities are only prompting negative outcomes. Moreover, none of these have any

tangible narrative impact, since it all comes down to a single either/or choice at the very end. To some, this fatally undermined the strong sense of agency we've felt as Max. And yet it makes perfect sense in light of Dontnod's desire to examine the physical and emotional devastation her choices have wrought. As the storm rips Arcadia Bay apart, we're given the chance to witness how the lives of its inhabitants have been changed — for better and worse — by Max's interference.

The game does this in an unusually confrontational way. We're usually given to believe that the choices we make in games are about doing what we think is right. As Max argues with an alternate-reality version of herself in the Two Whales café, we're invited to consider that there are other contributory factors at play. Here, the camera pulls in close to 'our' Max as the other one sneers: "Thought you could control everybody and everything, huh?" while looking out of the screen as if addressing us directly. It's a discomfiting moment that invites a certain self-reflection; little wonder it left some feeling uneasy.

Perhaps more significantly, this sequence presents an all-too-rare opportunity to truly get inside the head of a character. Max's inner monologue has given us some idea of what she thinks about the potential consequences

of her actions, but suddenly we're afforded an extended glimpse into the insecurities, doubts and fears that helped drive those decisions. At times, this seems almost unforgivably harsh on a character who never asked for the powers she was inexplicably given — not least when she receives a text from Chloe's father, blaming her for his death. At the same time, these nightmarish scenes are a valuable — not to mention creative and vivid — insight into the mindset of a woman increasingly realising she faces an almost impossible choice.

Meanwhile, the time spent away from the central pairing is thrown into sharp relief when Max wanders through a series of dioramas of key moments between her and Chole, an idealised perspective of their time together. If what precedes it was designed to show that life is more than just a series of highlights, then this might seem like a contradiction, but it's a valuable shaft of light in an episode that's mostly shade, not to mention a devious way of making that final choice of what to sacrifice all the tougher.

Whichever choice you opt for as Max and Chloe cling to each other in the face of the encroaching maelstrom, it soon becomes clear the end justifies Dontnod's means. The stats after the credits told us the final percentage split was 53/47. *Polarized*, indeed. ■

Rise Of The Tomb Raider

Publisher Square Enix
Developer Crystal Dynamics
Format 360, PC, PS4, Xbox One
(version tested)
Release Out now (360, Xbox One),
early 2016 (PC), late 2016 (PS4)

The tone, you'll be relieved to hear, is spot on. For all there was to like about Crystal Dynamics' 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot, at its core lay a fundamental disconnect between the supposed — and repeatedly expressed — vulnerability of its star and the stack of bodies she left behind her. At the start, you'd see her huddled up against the cold and the fear, apologetically skinning a deer; by game's end, still apparently terrified, she was spending her skill points on flashy shotgun finishing moves. With the messy origin story out of the way, Crystal Dynamics can devote the entirety of *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* to Lara Croft as the studio sees her in 2015: Sam Fisher with a ponytail; Marcus Fenix in tight trousers; Nathan Drake with a thigh gap.

The death count is significant, but when you have a combat system this good, it would be a shame to waste it. In battle, this is largely indistinguishable from Croft's previous outing: there was no need to mess with the meat of *Tomb Raider*'s combat, and so Crystal Dynamics hasn't. Instead there are a few subtle but intelligent changes around the periphery. Croft's Detective Mode equivalent, Survival Instincts, now shrouds nearby enemies in yellow or red to signal if a stealth kill will alert others. Bottles and cans dotted about the place can be turned into molotovs or grenades. Arrows and bandages can be crafted on the fly. This is sequel-making best practice, building out the possibility space without compromising the already-satisfying core.

The same applies to the platforming, which takes Croft's 2013 toolset, makes her unlock it all over again for some reason, then throws in a few new toys. She can grapple-hook across large gaps or up to high ledges. Arrows can be embedded in walls, either fired from afar or driven in mid-jump, to form makeshift platforms. They are marginal bolt-ons, adding new things to look out for in this slyly colour-coded land as well as providing new ways for Crystal Dynamics to chop its pseudo-open world up into discrete, gear-gated chunks.

In fairness, it's quite the world. *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* looks outrageous at times, especially when there's ice onscreen. Bright, crystalline and gleaming in the Himalayan sun, it looks almost too good to plunge an axe into, but there's an avalanche coming and you do need to get a shake on. It is a world of considerable variety, too, with hilltop settlements, old Soviet installations, crumbling ancient cities and no end of caves, mines and underground lakes in between. Like its predecessor, it's beautifully lit, and hangs together well, the only signs of a struggling Xbox One being a handful of framerate drops as you approach larger areas.

This level of artistry and fidelity is easier to achieve when you are sending the player down a funnel, of course. While many of *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*'s heart-thumping set-pieces are still exercises in holding up on the stick, the expanded platforming moveset means

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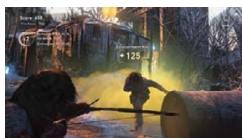
EXPEDITED PROGRESS
The reboot's online multiplayer component fails to return here – presumably because few ever played it. Taking its place is Expeditions, a score-attack mode that lets you speedrun story chapters or devise your own multi-objective challenges for others. Modifiers come in the form of cards bought with a currency you earn by playing the game – there's no real-money option, at least in our review build – and will either increase or reduce your final score depending on whether they're a help or a hindrance. It's an OK diversion, but without the narrative urgency of the campaign it's a shade lacking, while comedy modifiers (big heads, enemies on fire) do little to hold the attention. Still, it's far preferable to another barren me-too deathmatch mode.

there's more to think about, and there are enough sharp turns and sudden changes of pace to make you feel you're doing more than playing along to a cutscene. Elsewhere, allies offer up sidequests, while challenges — disable alarm bells, take down Soviet flags — aren't delivered and must be discovered through exploration.

The knock-on effect of this gentle broadening of scope is a slower pace. That's no bad thing in itself, but does mean *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* takes a while to get into its stride, especially since Croft must reacquire the traversal moveset she learned two years ago. Once she's limbered up, and the story's setup is out of the way, things improve significantly. Croft is on the hunt for an artefact, believed to hold the secret to immortal life, the fruitless search for which drove her father to his apparent suicide. Also rather keen on this immortality-granting MacGuffin is a shadowy PMC called Trinity; in between are the natives, whose trust Croft must earn before the fun stuff can begin. Off we go, eventually, to the lost ancient city of Kitezh, where yet another interested party shows up to complicate things.

It is, once again, pulpy, predictable and thoroughly enjoyable, a Saturday matinee serial with an X-rated bodycount. Unlike its predecessor, it makes sense. Rather than turn a trembling gap-year student into a one-girl army, Croft arrives here of her own steely will to prove that the treasure whose apparent nonexistence sent her father, disgraced, to his grave is real — and if she has to create a few orphans herself along the way, then so be it. Those hoping for the return of the less combative, more exploratory Croft of the mid-'90s will be disappointed Crystal Dynamics has lost little of its bloodlust, instead finding better justification for it.

No less potentially deflating are the over-hyped tombs themselves, which in reality are pretty much the single-room puzzle chambers of the reboot. They're better hidden and less blatantly signposted, however, and the journeys to them are gear-gated, lengthy and often complex, hinting at something rather grander than what you ultimately find: a large chamber with a prize on a high ledge and a physics puzzle in the way. The world itself is, in fairness, more full of tomb-like areas than before, especially as you close in on Kitezh.

Rise Of The Tomb Raider is a competent, confident, handsome sequel to a competent, confident, handsome game. This is a gentle refinement, ironing out kinks, sewing on a few accoutrements, and leaving everything else the way it was. It is a little safe, but then Crystal Dynamics is probably entitled to tinker with a series it only reinvented two short years ago. Quite where Croft goes from here is another matter — many will continue to call for a return to the quiet, patient puzzling on which she made her name — but on this evidence she's in safe, if blood-covered, hands.

8

ABOVE An upgraded version of the reboot's lighting tech paints beautiful scenes, with heavy bloom emphasising the transition from dark to light, and remarkable fire and particle effects – both frequent sights later on

MAIN Ice, lovely to look at as it may be, is often used to impede your progress. The suspended weight on the left here signals that you need to shatter some frozen water to expose a navigable path. **ABOVE** Crystal Dynamics has an eye for framing, though perhaps not for colour coordination. Lara gets a bit lost here; thankfully her alternative costumes mix up the colour palette and also afford small stat boosts. **LEFT** Aerial takedowns are a skill-tree option, and stealth is now more viable overall. Some areas can, theoretically, be sneaked through all the way, but why do that when Croft has a quiver full of explosive arrows?

Assassin's Creed Syndicate

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house (Quebec)
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Pack up, lads, we're done. *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* is barely half an hour old. We have sauntered through a Sussex workhouse and killed its foreman. Our reward is £1,000 — a tremendous amount of money in 1868, equivalent to £1.8 million today. We needn't spend 40 hours chasing down Crawford Starrick, who runs Victorian London from behind the scenes with his iron fist and extravagant moustache. We can simply pay off his goons, and bring him down from within.

We can't, however, because despite the average labourer earning 30 shillings a week in the 1860s, here a throwing knife costs £50. It's understandable — pre-decimal UK currency is unfathomable to all but those who used it — but it's an instant fracture to the fiction. The vast majority of the French publisher's customer base won't notice, of course, but to we rosbifs it's a jarring example of what happens when *Assassin's Creed*'s brand of historical tourism drops anchor close to home.

Price inflation aside, however, this is a surprisingly sensitive redrawing of 1860s London. Some streets have been widened to accommodate horse-and-carriage traffic; others have been removed entirely. It's a little too sunny, too, the desire to re-use *Unity*'s delightful lighting engine prized over faithfulness to an era where every rooftop belched black smoke, and a country which spends ten months of the year shrouded in grey. And as the series' house style demands, this is a London where Alexander Graham Bell breaks off from inventing the telephone to fashion you a poison dart, and Charles Darwin helps you shut down a drug operation. But on the whole it's a delightful trip back to a time when Leicester Square was full of trees and violinists, rather than trollied Essex lads and disappointed tourists.

And you'll journey through it while looking over the shoulders of someone you like. The two protagonists, Evie and Jacob Frye, are the best leads this series has produced since Ezio Auditore. With Evie favouring stealth and her brother preferring a brass-knuckled approach, there's tension between the two in more ways than the expected sibling rivalry, and there are times in the main questline where they're actively working against each other. Throughout they're witty, charming and somehow believable, even as they're jumping off a four-storey building to stab a goon in the neck.

And, crucially after last year's mess with *Unity*, their game works — at least mostly. Sometimes the heavy motion blur that kicks in when you're moving at speed can't quite mask abrupt LOD transitions, and there's the odd dropped frame when things get busy. And while the Fryes are far more capable than *Unity*'s dunderheaded Arno Dorian, they're still prone to being confused by the scenery at awkward moments.

This is a series built on a foundation of elegant movement, however, and there's little of that here. Climbing has lost its sweaty-palmed thrill now that

> It's a delightful trip back to a time when Leicester Square was full of trees and violinists, not trollied Essex lads

you can spring up ten feet of sheer wall by simply pressing forward. In any case, parkour has been as good as eradicated by the widened streets and new rope launcher, which will take you from terra firma to the top of St Paul's in a couple of seconds.

But perhaps that's no bad thing. *Assassin's Creed* world designers have long had their ambition reined in by the length of a jump. They have spent their days plastering roadsides with banana boxes, wagons and hay bales to lead the player to the rooftops, then tethering buildings with cables and clotheslines to ensure a near-unbroken route to any destination. They've been crafting adventure playgrounds first and worlds second. The rope launcher sets the designer free from those constraints, gives the player a new way of looking at space and stealth puzzles, and offers a speedy means of escape when things go south. And to Londoners, so often hemmed in by the throng? It's a cathartic delight.

Syndicate works, then, in its setting, its concept and its characters — the very things that change every year and so mark out each new *Assassin's Creed* from its predecessor. That alone suggests a success. Beneath the glossy surface, however, things fall apart.

Enemies are idiots. They patrol their fixed routes and are gormlessly lured round blind corners or towards rustling compost heaps by a whistle. Out on the street, you'll aggro them on sight from the second the Fryes set foot in London to the moment you buy the costly upgrade that puts a stop to it. Combat, meanwhile, is as rote and repetitive as ever, but now takes twice as long. The Fryes prefer small, concealable weapons, and while skill-tree upgrades help to hurry things along, even powerful brass knuckles, kukri knives and cane swords might need to be swung a couple of dozen times to put an enemy on the floor.

Mission design is similarly stuck in the past. You travel to a map marker, find a suitable entry point to a stronghold, then sneak or punch your way to a target who must either be killed or kidnapped. Sidequests hew even closer to the template, the same handful of mission types recycled endlessly. Had *Syndicate* come out before *Metal Gear Solid V* had rewritten the book on open-world stealth and mission design, it would still have felt dated. Now it is simply archaic.

Jacob and Evie, and the colossal London they are steadily reclaiming, just about save the day. Together, they present Ubisoft with an opportunity. The Ezio era is regarded as the series' heyday because it was a time of stability: a beautifully realised setting in an iconic period, starring a likeable protagonist. Were Ubisoft to devote to these ageing systems the resources it spends each year on a new world and cast, it might be on to something. The alternative is a series that, for all its wanderlust, is never truly going anywhere.

6

ABOVE Combat has never been so violent. Emptying a health bar doesn't kill enemies, but has them stagger around awaiting a finishing move. Set up several and you can trigger an extravagant, brutal, multi-kill reward

TOP This is no ordinary zipline: even when it's sloping downwards like this, you still have to use the analogue stick to move along it. Handy when lining up a precise drop into cover in a stealth mission, it's nonetheless jarring to find one of your go-to tools is so willing to break the laws of physics.
MAIN Per house style, alternative outfits that offer stat boosts can be unlocked as you progress. Some of the best bonuses are to be had from legacy costumes, but we're not about to wander Victorian London in Ezio's Florentine robes.
RIGHT Force yourself to ignore the rope launcher and there are thrills to be had climbing London's many landmarks. But tall buildings are no longer puzzles to be solved – simply holding up on the stick can take you straight to the summit
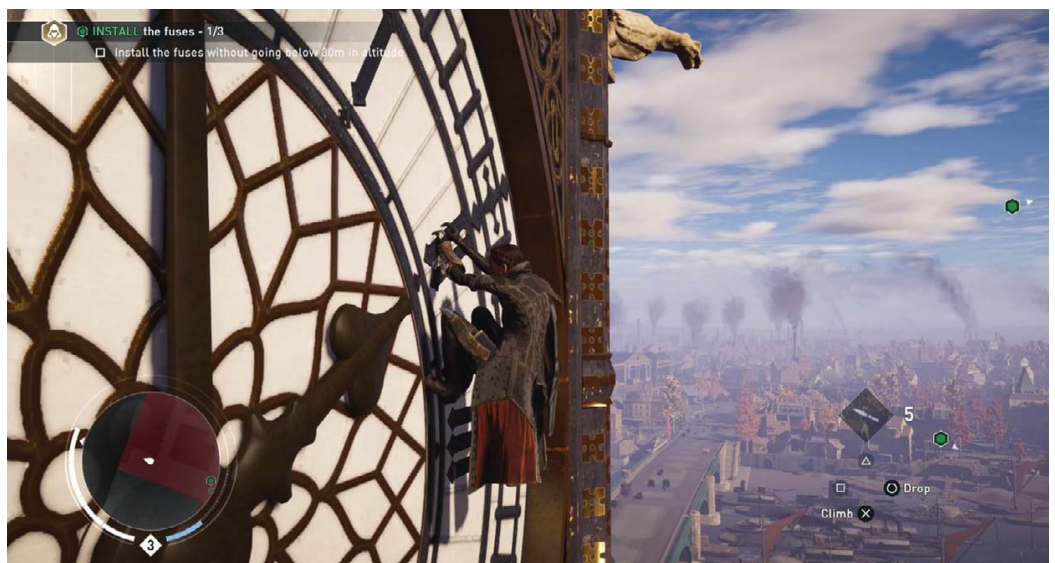
Yakuza 5

T he *Yakuza* series is known in the west as a sort of hybrid of *GTA* and *Streets Of Rage* — an open-world gangster caper in which you knock the stuffing out of ne'er-do-wells on the mean streets of various cities in contemporary Japan. So why are we in a TV dressing room, fretting about our hair and makeup, stressed out because we just spilled coffee all over a talent show's producer after a rival tripped us up?

There are plenty of heads in need of knocking together in *Yakuza 5*, of course, but this series has always been defined by the things Toshihiro Nagoshi and team get you doing when you're *not* punching people's teeth in. Many of the series' long-running, oh-so-Japanese distractions return: the hostess-club flirtations, the karaoke sessions, mahjong parlours and so on. Yet even now, five numbered games and a handful of spinoffs later, *Yakuza* retains the capacity to surprise. You'll have a fistfight with a bear, improvise a standup comedy routine, and learn life lessons from a cross-dressing beautician who lives under a bridge. You'll stop off for some ramen on the way home and find yourself behind the counter filling orders because the server's put his back out. And, yes, you'll spend 15 hours of your life trying to become a pop star.

The game's third chapter tells the story of Haruka Sawamura, a series regular who is playable here for the first time. Having spent the preceding games under the care of series frontman Kazuma Kiryu, she's now living alone in Osaka, working for a local talent agency on her quest for stardom. The tone, mechanics and purpose of the game change entirely: the random punchups that bar your progress when out on the street in control of one of the four other leads disappear, and are replaced by optional rhythm-action dance battles with fellow wannabes. A bulletin board at the agency leads to jobs that boost Haruka's profile and her employer's, perhaps singing, dancing or shaking hands. Every activity raises your skills, making you better able to tackle your primary task: winning the Princess League talent show, where victory means a major-label contract.

That's the plan, anyway, though of course things quickly turn sour. Greater forces are at work, dragging the five protagonists from their daily lives around Japan to the series' stomping ground of Kamurocho. Before long, Haruka's talent agency is in tatters, a murderer's trail leading back to her childhood home. Taiga Saejima is lured to the big city from the prison where he's serving time for assault. Shun Akiyama is called home from his bid to expand his ethical money-lending business to Osaka. New character Tatsuo Shinada, a former baseball player kicked out of the sport after being framed for match-fixing, gets suckered in too.

All of them accept their changed roles willingly enough, except for face-ruiner-in-chief Kiryu, whose latest attempt to escape his dark past had him living

> You'll have a fistfight with a bear, improvise a standup comedy routine, and learn life lessons from a beautician

WILD HUNT
The burly Saejima broke out of prison last time out, but gives himself up early on in *Yakuza 5* to clear his rap sheet – and his conscience – before a planned rise up the Tojo Clan hierarchy. He's given reason to break out before long, but his escape across the snowy Hokkaido mountains goes awry, and he soon finds himself living among a village of hunters. Suddenly *Yakuza 5* becomes a stealth shooter. Saejima stalks his prey, setting traps and popping off headshots, before selling meat and hides on his return to town. The critical path leads you elsewhere after a few hours, but you can stay up here for weeks if you want, levelling up and learning new skills. We'd advise getting out of Hokkaido quickly, though, as Sawamura's pop-star quest is right around the corner.

under an assumed name as a taxi driver in Fukuoka. The Fourth Chairman of Tokyo's Tojo Clan has spent more of this series trying to walk away from a life of violence than he has living it, but really should know by now that whatever he does, trouble will always track him down. So it proves. An innocuous opening few hours quickly gives way to a web of family fallouts, kidnappings, disappearances, double- and triple-crosses, and an awful lot of blood-stained pavements. Kiryu once again heads back to Tokyo to save the Tojo Clan and the rest of the underworld from spiralling into chaos, taking a sizeable chunk of urban Japan down with it.

It's the same old story, in other words, and the same old game at heart, too. There's something jarring about random battles in the year 2015, but almost everything about *Yakuza 5* will jar in some way by today's standards. It was far from the most handsome of games during the PS3 era, and is hardly flattered by the three years of technical progress made since its Japanese release. NPCs pop in from about 20 feet away, an obvious concession to performance that still can't prevent some severe drops in framerate when the screen gets busy. But Kamurocho has always looked like this; should Sega see fit to bring the series PS4 debut *Yakuza Zero* west it will take some time to adjust to a setting shorn of its decade-old, Vaseline-smeared rough edges.

Combat is still a clunky old beast too, but it has always had a certain charm. That's thanks largely to the Heat system, which unlocks powerful, often ludicrous finishing moves when you fill a bar by landing attacks. Kiryu grabs downed enemies and scrapes their faces back and forth on the tarmac; Saejima grabs their feet and spins them round, hitting other foes in the vicinity; while Shinada draws on his old baseball skills. And Sawamura? Well, she has a dance-off to handbag house music. Violence isn't always the solution, you know.

Sawamura's popstrel adventure is perhaps the clearest example yet of the true spirit of the *Yakuza* series. This, like its forebears, is a game of real heart — something that is too easily overlooked in the context of the thousands of broken bodies you leave in your wake. Violence is an unavoidable means to an end, the only language these thugs understand; many of them, vanquished and chastened, will resolve on the spot to change their ways. The protagonists will, at journey's end, do the same. *Yakuza 5* is a game about repairing a world you've grown to love, one step at a time, whether by averting a country-wide gang war, improving the needy's access to finance, or simply helping a young woman achieve her childhood dream by tapping controller buttons in time to J-pop. The result is a game of charming positive spirit that, three years late and a generation off the pace, still stands out in a crowded, wantonly destructive field.

7

RIGHT Nods to Sega's history are everywhere, but Kiryu's cabbie missions are no *Crazy Taxi*. You're marked down for ignoring road signs, failing to signal before turning and even braking too hard.
MAIN Visual quality improves in cutscenes, with foreign-language audio helping disguise some iffy lip-sync work. Here Kiryu wears the look of a man who's been told he's got to go back to Tokyo yet again.
BOTTOM Saejima spends a few hours in the snowbound, fictional city of Tsukimino. One side-mission has him creeping across an icy road with a bowl of takeaway ramen

ABOVE Handshake events involve conversing with fans through colour-coded responses. The longer you hold hands, the faster the Satisfaction bar fills; overdo it and a burly handler intervenes, draining a chunk of meter

Tales From The Borderlands: Season One

Decades after the original disappointments, calling a game an interactive movie tends to be less a description than an assassination. With *Tales From The Borderlands*, however, Telltale offers as good a defence as anyone's ever made for sitting back and enjoying a ride where anything is possible, provided you can hammer a QTE action button quickly enough.

Calling it a movie isn't quite right, in fairness. Like most of Telltale's games, it's closer to television in terms of pacing, variety and character, only with far more of a desire to not be a regular show, but your *favourite* show. Like its characters, it often succeeds despite itself, through charm and wit and momentum, bouncing from set-piece to set-piece with an infectious confidence that makes it easy to ignore how little you're usually contributing except laughter. The standard Telltale gripes are all here, it's simply harder to care during a comedy than in the more muted drama of *The Wolf Among Us* or *Game Of Thrones*.

No knowledge or enjoyment of *Borderlands* is required here – in fact, many of *Tales'* biggest fans don't like the originals much at all. This is very much its own game, fleshing out the world of Pandora and its evil corporate overlords and showing it from a far more interesting angle. You're not a hard-as-nails team of Vault Hunters this time, but a gang of screw-ups and schmucks led by the two main characters: arrogant but good-natured salaryman Rhys, and cowgirl-style con-woman Fiona. Both are, of course, seeking the treasures of one of Pandora's cursed Vaults. This time, though, the quest for fortune isn't built on shooting, but wit, friendship, espionage, and pulling off the occasional suicidal heist as time permits.

The five-episode arc tells a great story, with the only real frustration coming from the moments where the action briefly aspires to be more involved than it is, ironically acting as a reminder of how much more Telltale would be capable of were it not so wedded to its template. There's also a running theme of collecting money, which threatens to become a part of decision making, but can also be used to buy new in-game costumes or similar cosmetic tweaks, such as caravan paint jobs. Just as *Tales* stumbles on new mechanics with potential, however, it drops them and retreats to the comfort of conversations and QTEs.

Happily, the content in those sections is good enough to forgive many sins. From the first episode's extended sequence during a chaotic death race to each episode's gloriously choreographed musical intro, Telltale knocks the cutscenes out of the park. Voice actors Troy Baker and Laura Bailey both bring their A-game to Rhys and Fiona, with Telltale's writing and animation teams letting the character models act their hearts out, whether they're doing gags or going through one of the more sombre moments that cast the laughs

> It's funny. It's dramatic. It's fun to catch a ride with Rhys and Fiona as they plunder the Borderlands for all they've got

CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE
Telltale's games often sabotage themselves by putting more emphasis on choice than they really offer. Replay and it quickly becomes obvious that most branches are illusionary, looping back to the same result with little but a line change. *Tales'* choice mechanics aren't really about that, though, but rather feeling responsive during the one playthrough that Telltale expects – to offer malleability instead of fixed pathing. At that, it's effective, especially in moments where your decisions determine your allies for the final push, as are some of the smaller details, such as taking the time to find money to buy fancier gear. It's all cosmetic, but it's still a dopamine drip of reward that helps justify playing the series rather than simply watching it all on YouTube.

into proper relief, making the story more than just a relentlessly goofy comedy.

In particular, *Tales* embraces the need for a cinematic game to *feel* cinematic, showing Rhys and Fiona's plans with Hustle-style demonstrations of everything going far better than everyone knows it's going to, as well as cheery breaks from reality. This happens a lot, not least because both characters are veteran BS artists telling a story to a mysterious bounty hunter who has them at gunpoint. Not that it stops them sniping at each other constantly over what went wrong, or trying to steal the credit.

It's a game full of glorious little touches, which encourages you to pick the funnier choice — both because, unlike *The Walking Dead*, you know it all turns out essentially OK, and because it's far more fun to see Rhys desperately try to throttle a guard who's too amused by his sad attempt to mind all that much, or for Fiona to spit sarcasm at enemies at gunpoint. Other highlights include a character getting shot with a paralytic and spending a whole episode only able to move their eyes and being treated like a prop by their supposed friends, and a trip to Hyperion's orbital HQ to take part in the most gloriously over-the-top finger-gun battle since the second series of Spaced.

All of this silliness is also why the limited choices tend to work. They're not, for the most part, issues of morality but of fun, and the QTEs that surround them are enjoyable enough in concept to get past the limited interactions. An early example involves Rhys having a colleague send him a guardian — a Loader-Bot, whose growing humanity and weariness soon makes it *Tales'* breakout star — with the option to kit it out with your choice of gear. It's obvious that whatever you choose will work, but that doesn't mean choosing and seeing the outcome isn't entertaining in itself.

To some extent, though, it's hard not to feel a little guilty about that. All the running issues with Telltale's current design template remain. There are no puzzles, no challenge; the only real interactions are the same button-mashing minigame a hundred times over, along with occasional choices that never affect as much as they feel like they should.

On its own terms, *Tales From The Borderlands* is one of Telltale's best works yet. Each of the five two-hour-long episodes flies past, to the point that it's difficult to find time to pause and complain about the lapses until it's over, at which point there are far more entertaining things to think about. It's funny. It's dramatic. It's great fun to catch a ride with Rhys and Fiona as they plunder the Borderlands for all they've got. The entertainment value is a bit of a con-trick at heart, but it's a damn fine trick and one there's no shame in being sucked in by while the illusion lasts.

8

So how quickly you come out will probably have to do with how much I hurt you. So if you come out quick, then dandy.

LEFT From the stealth scenes to the combat bits, it can get annoying to have every cool moment reduced to just clicking on demand.
BELOW Death never kept a good villain down. It didn't do much to shut up Handsome Jack either. He's more likeably awful here than in *Borderlands 2*, though.
MAIN To *Tales'* credit, when it does give you options, it commits to them. It's fun just to see the outcome, and buoying to not feel constrained by the sensible choices

ABOVE In terms of making the *Borderlands* world feel like a real place, Telltale does more than all of the shooters on which it builds. Pandora is a place where people (reluctantly) live now, not just a shooting gallery
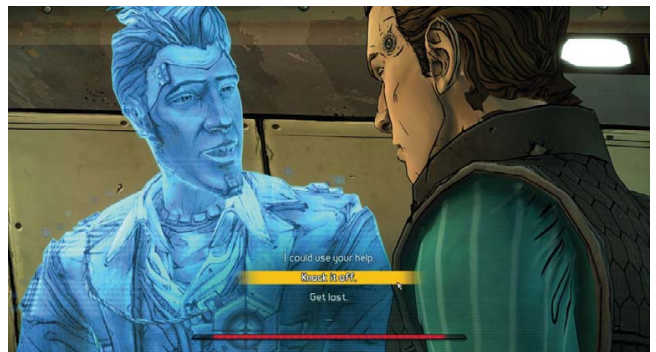
Need For Speed

The *Need For Speed* series has had many previous owners, not all careful. Pioneer Productions had the first set of keys, delivering the series' 1994 debut on 3DO. But since then the chassis has changed hands many times, body panels beaten into whatever shape suits, be it the street racing of EA Black Box's *Underground*, Slightly Mad's track-day atmosphere in *Shift* or Criterion's nods to its own *Burnout* series. Ghost Games sees its second turn at the wheel, after 2013's *Rivals*, as a reboot that coheres all those disparate threads into a definitive *Need For Speed* offering. Yet its game doesn't so much merge the series' many facets as reimagine *Underground* for HD consoles.

So *Need For Speed* offers up a variety of racing, drifting and time-trial events — but dispenses with dull drag challenges in favour of gymkhana showboating — all within the boundaries of Ventura Bay. It's a sinuous LA-inspired city locked in perpetual nighttime and bathed in a sickly urban glow. The various events are divided into five categories (Speed, Style, Build, Crew and Outlaw) each representing its own progression path that opens particular upgrades, special cars and, of course, harder challenges.

Speed and Style cover off basic racing, time trials, drift and gymkhana meets, while Build events place a focus on tweaking your car's performance — events are the same, but gently encourage you to up the output of your stock engine. Crew and Outlaw missions exist at the social and sociopathic extremes of the petrolhead spectrum, the former embroiling you in Drift Train and touge events that require you to stay close to others in order to score points, the latter all about toying with the city's law enforcement. The more Outlaw missions you play, the harder the police are to shake off.

Whether you favour a particular thread, or want to work your way through all five simultaneously, you'll receive event invites from a group of street racers, who have each thrown their lot in with a discipline. Your crew are a needy lot, bombarding you with phone calls even when you're driving in the same event, and often embroiling you in awkward group chats in which their not-particularly-complicated relationships play out. You can choose to ignore calls, though, and they'll get back in touch at a later date or leave a message on your phone (which you can bring up at any time with a button press), and either form of communication drops a new mission marker on the map. The Outlaw events, however, are buried in texts, meaning that you have to seek them out yourself and can therefore minimise police chases if you'd rather focus elsewhere.

The story is portrayed by real actors in cutscenes that adeptly blend rendered cars and environments with live action (though not as seamlessly as the game's E3 debut suggested) in a lingo-soaked, fist-bump-heavy plot that desperately wants to be much cooler than it is.

Publisher Electronic Arts
Developer Ghost Games
Format PC, PS4 (version tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Cars feel aloof, conforming to a heavily prescribed physics model that means driving never feels organic

WASH OUT
Need For Speed's night-through-to-dusk setting is capable of delivering moments of beauty, and the constant drizzle ensures that the dazzling lighting is doubly showcased. But the veil of gloom that lingers beyond the streetlights means that the world's best vistas are curtailed and the constant yellows and blues melt Ventura Bay into an indistinguishable, samey whole. The art direction does a good job of capturing the atmosphere of illegal street racing, but a little more variety would have been welcome – especially given the absence of *Rivals'* breathtaking weather effects. Meanwhile, *Rivals'* biggest asset – the risk-reward setup of its Racer career, in which you have to bank Speed Points at hideouts – is limply reused for the Outlaw missions.

The sequences ring false but are cheesily entertaining, and add a welcome human element to your progression. Progress far enough and you'll start to meet real driving stars, too, including rally driver Ken Block and the Chicago-based street-racing collective Risky Devil. It's silly fun, and there is a buzz in having real drivers compliment you on your digital performance — even if their talent in front of the camera mostly doesn't justify a returned endorsement.

If only the driving was as campily enjoyable. *Need For Speed* offers up an in-depth tuning system that lets you easily adjust any vehicle's capacity to go sideways or stick. But no matter where those sliders come to rest, *Need For Speed*'s cars feel lumpen and aloof, conforming to a heavily prescribed physics model that means driving never feels organic. Your handbrake's strength can be adjusted, for example, but doing so simply changes how many fractions of a second it takes for the car to lurch to the same 45-degree angle when you yank it — a helping hand presumably intended to ease progression into drifts but which results in a Scalextric-esque absence of nuance. Things improve if you rely on excess torque and foot-braking, but getting a car to drift fluidly and predictably often feels like work, and therefore rarely as much fun as it should be.

This sense of heavy-handed designer influence is further underscored in the odd sensation of riding on an invisible set of rails when you crest the stunt ramps dotted sporadically around the city, and the aggressive, opponent-favouring rubberbanding, which ensures the only surprises you're likely to encounter during events will be down to the AI's frequent stupidity — we regularly witnessed cars driving the wrong way around routes, getting stuck on scenery, and violently ignoring our presence. Your crew might exhibit exaggerated personalities in cutscenes, but none of that is translated to the track. At least you can suffer in company, with up to seven other players in the world, inviting local drivers and your crew to events, or dropping the gauntlet for an on-the-spot race or drifting challenge. Even this feels a little unnatural, since manoeuvring to a position that gets the right prompt to display is needlessly fussy.

There are far more confident touches, not least in the powerful car decal editor and a dynamic camera that twists and zooms during drifts, but they're undermined by a litany of design missteps that rankle in isolation and fatigue as a whole. Why, for example, must we come to nearly a full stop and be facing the right way to trigger an event when most begin with a rolling start cutscene and a track reset? And why can't we fast travel to fellow players' positions on the map? *Need For Speed* is a disappointing follow-up to the flawed but big-hearted *Rivals*, and while it's billed as a fresh start for the series, it feels more like a false one.

4

RIGHT Gymkhana events ask you to follow in the tyre tracks of Ken Block's incredible stunts. If you make enough of an impression, you'll get to drive with him. **MAIN** Ghost's game takes its name seriously once you're in the more powerful vehicles, the city whipping by at an unnerving rate. **BOTTOM** Every car comes with predesigned liveries to use as bases for your own. Alternatively, you can start afresh and go for something as tasteless as possible
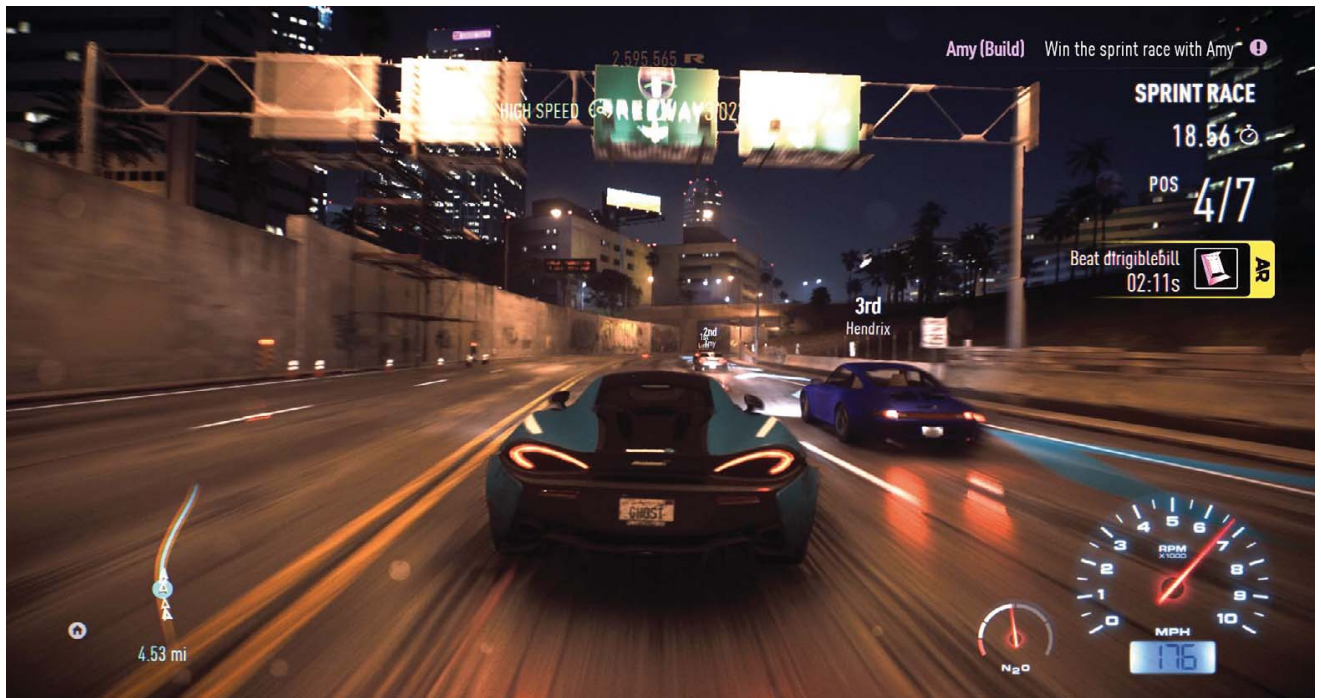
ABOVE Once you master the technique, drifting becomes more enjoyable, but it makes you work too hard to find the sweet spot, with little sense of reward. Stringing multiple drifts together is especially precarious

Prison Architect

Some people just don't want to be helped. You can offer rehabilitation courses, provide canteens so sparkling clean you could eat your dinner off the floor, and stick a pool table in the rec room, but when your stock in trade is the care of felons, there's still always some malcontent who's willing to shank a man in the showers over a funny look. It's a bleak life lesson, but it's not the only one lurking like a landmine in this colourful and often charming sim-management game.

The campaign has a select few spikes of discomfort (you start by administering corporal punishment and progress to quelling riots with extreme prejudice), which underpin the drawn-out process of becoming institutionalised in the bevy of reporting and security tools at your disposal. It's an intricate web of systems, sure, but even after five hours of thinly veiled tutorials, you'll still need to lean on the wiki to understand the game's idiosyncrasies. Partially that's a result of depth; despite the title, procurement, administrator, bean counter, day planner, nutritionist, guard captain and rehab officer all fall under your remit. But there's an inscrutability here that goes beyond the UI, places where brutalist systems logic stand proud over sense — drains do nothing under shower heads, for example,

Publisher/developer
Introversion Software
Format PC
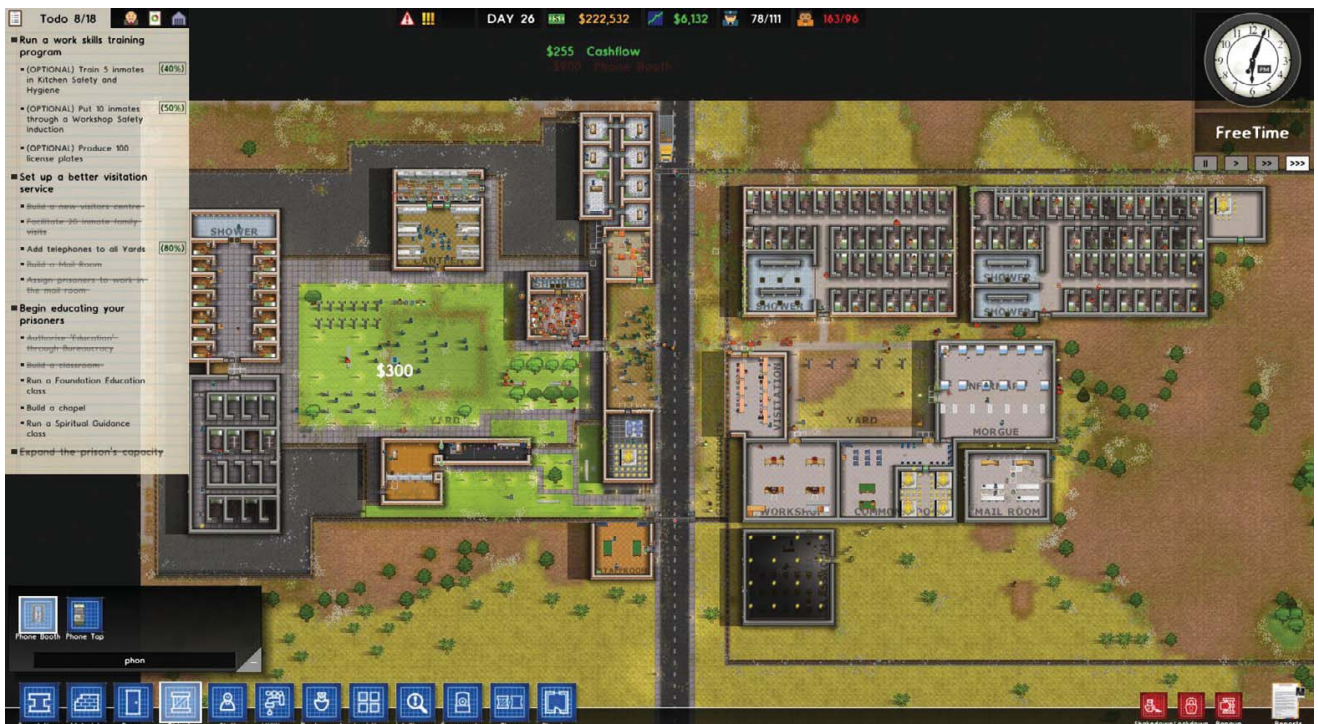**Release** Out now

BREAKOUT SUCCESS
If you tire of a desk job, Escape mode allows you to don a jumpsuit and attempt to bust out of your gaols (or Steam Workshop examples). In any big house, your fists make your reputation, every ruckus earning points to buy gang mates and better skills, or dodge time in lockup. Later, your focus turns to finding the contraband to enact a disappearing act, be that via a fire or a midnight tunnel. The process is a decent palate cleanser, and can also be useful for finding security holes.

while prisoners, rather than seeing a free lunch, won't leave their cells to eat in your canteen if there are no walls to hem them in on the trip. There's a smattering of bugs too, the most common being that workers will ironically imprison themselves in building projects.

Learn its quirks, however, and *Prison Architect*'s sandbox permits a dizzying breadth of options for establishing for-profit penal facilities. If recidivism merely sounds like the chime of cash registers to you, then forget reform and clamp down hard with armoured guards, strict regimes and a shield of red-tape-spewing lawyers. If you'd rather turn your inmates to repaying their debt to you, if not society, then establish a workshop and start churning out number plates. The rehab angle is trickier, fiscally speaking (and your ambitions will grind to a halt when money runs low), though there are grants to support correctional paths.

Whatever policy you adopt, the god-like overview and focus on hard cash is insidiously dehumanising — your gaze is inexorably drawn to the bigger picture, the great milling ant farm of prison life, crashing focus only for the most troublesome cases. And that might just be *Prison Architect*'s long-game masterstroke, despite its flaws. Even as you schedule another hour of hard labour and experiment with inmate nutrition for a cheque, you'll see a shivving, sigh, and tell yourself that some people just don't want to be helped.

8

Initially, it's disappointing to learn many rooms are most cost efficient as a squat block at their minimum size and object quota, but the ability to cash in a successful build means you can toy with less practical creations

Broforce

Broforce dedicates a key to making your character flex, which initially seems to tell you everything you need to know about this side-scrolling run'n'gun homage to high-gore '80s action flicks. Yes, it's a game that's all about recreating the massacre scene from Hot Shots! Part Deux, going so far as to include its own end-of-level bodycount tally. But beneath its oiled biceps and 'roided-up barks, this gun show is far smarter than the average retro-styled shooter.

Rather than blast in all directions, *Broforce* only allows you to fire straight ahead, but everything in its levels can be destroyed. Need to take out a bipedal tank that's impervious to bullets? Carve the earth out from underneath it, sending it plummeting to its doom. Want to stop reinforcements coming over that bridge? Knock it out. Heck, you don't even need to follow set paths, but can use your gun and wall-hanging ability to tunnel to the exit flag. You may want to reconsider spelunking into random caves when the Aliens show up, however.

Well, they're not exactly Aliens — just as Indiana Brones is not officially a character played by Harrison Ford, and Broniversal Soldier isn't an alter ego of Jean-Claude Van Damme. Except they are, and they're near perfect. Each of *Broforce*'s colossal cast is a triple-

Publisher Devolver Digital
Developer Free Lives
Format PC (version tested), PS4
Release Out now, TBC (PS4)

UNLEASH THE BEAST?
Thanks to *Broforce*'s random character spawns, there's a trade-off involved in freeing hostages – whoever you become may not be as good as who you're already controlling. Counteracting that is the lure of new cast members, unlocked for hitting rescue number targets. You never quite know which recognisable face is going to show up next, and while the roster is heavy on men, it's good to see that Ellen Ripley and Cherry Darling aren't excluded from the action.

Basic Aliens aren't too tough, but acid-based variants will nibble away the level and your lives if left unchecked. You may think these are hellish tests of skill, but later you'll visit Hades and realise they're nothing of the sort

distilled, hypergonadal version of their silver-screen selves. Double Bro Seven wields his Walther PPK, and tapping into his four-part special bar can bring out a raft of Q Branch gizmos, though he begins by quaffing a martini. The Brominator wields a minigun, and turns into an invulnerable metal skeleton when consuming his single special charge. Not all bros are equal, however, and you get a random one each spawn, so you can be left trying to take down a flying boss with just Blade's blade.

There are other potential frustrations too. Played alone, this can be a tough game: a single bullet will end you, and only by rescuing caged hostages will you gain more than your starting life. But these volatile levels are so desperate to go bang as to be unmanageable with more than one co-op partner, despite technically prohibiting friendly fire. All it takes is for an errant bullet to clip a red barrel or overhead stone to send a teammate to the next life, assuming they have one.

Still, *Broforce* wants to be rock hard, and would probably call you a wuss and give you a wedgie for being bothered by a little thing like repeated deaths. It gets away with that because of its sheer cheerful audacity and because it lets you jack straight into the halcyon days of two-swears-a-minute gun-porn cinema. So, yes, it's hopped up on steroids and testosterone, but Free Lives knows the score, and delivers one of the smartest dumb games since *Super Time Force*.

8

Minecraft: Story Mode – The Order Of The Stone

Stamping Telltale's heavily authored narrative template onto Mojang's world of unbridled player creativity is a curious notion, and a marriage that seems disharmonious from the off. "It's better when you make it yourself," says one character after another crafts a replacement sword, and most players will find themselves nodding along in agreement.

Even once you've made peace with the format, the problems are not insignificant. The pacing of this opening episode is strangely uneven for a studio with such storytelling experience. And while *Minecraft*'s aesthetic has taken on meaning, that utilitarian look is an uncomfortable fit for a presentational style that draws from the visual language of TV and cinema. Even so, its action beats fare better than its clumsy exploratory thirdperson sequences, with their restrictive camera angles and limited interactions.

A younger audience may not notice, but it's disappointing, too, how closely this adheres to the studio's established formula — two or three sequences share alarming similarities with *The Walking Dead*, albeit a PG-rated cut. And given that its gentle humour and simple plotting are considerably tuned to its target demographic, it's strange that players aren't given more

Publisher Mojang, Telltale Games
Developer Telltale Games
Format 360, Android, iOS, PC, PS3, PS4 (version tested), Vita, Wii U, Xbox One
Release Out now
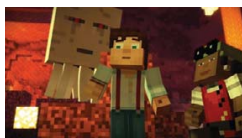
SPEED BUILD
The second episode, *Assembly Required,* followed unusually hard on the heels of the first, launching just a fortnight later. Telltale might believe a younger audience is likely to be less tolerant of long waits between instalments, though the short gap might be thanks to a brief runtime; the episode lasts barely an hour. A brisker pace is welcome, but in other respects it's a disappointing follow-up that fails to meaningfully build upon the character groundwork that was laid in the premiere.

time to make decisions, and that QTE sequences are often unforgiving in their timing. Indeed, while button commands are easily parsed, blocky arrows indicating D-pad or analogue-stick inputs can sometimes be missed in the heat of the moment.

If certain plot developments won't surprise many adults and the characterisation is a little thin at this early stage, there are ideas and themes here that will resonate with players of the right age. The central setpiece — a convention for budding builders goes predictably awry — is imaginatively realised. And if the pride felt at the effort invested in harvesting resources and building colossal structures is lost, there is comedic mileage in the speed and simplicity of the process, as four friends knock up a 30-foot monstrosity in a matter of seconds. The voice cast is strong, too, particularly Ashley Johnson as the courageous and likeable Petra, although Jesse's pet pig, Reuben, steals the show with little more than a handful of expressions and squeals.

For parents, there's a psychological fascination in witnessing your offspring's choices — as well as the pride or horror that results from seeing them test their social skills and morals. But while many kids will relish choosing the name of their gang, and delight in the reminders of that decision, some will be left wondering why a world that normally affords great agency doesn't offer more room to shape their story.

6

Protagonist Jesse can be male or female. Both lead actors put in solid performances, though for once we favoured a male – Patton Oswalt may sound slightly too old in the role, but his comic timing is typically strong

Rodea The Sky Soldier

First impressions of *Rodea* aren't promising. Boot it up and a musical sting plays; too short for the initial load, it loops back around only to cut out almost immediately. Somehow, what follows is often much worse. If you thought *Devil's Third* was as bad as it was going to get for Wii U this year, NIS America has an unpleasant surprise in store.

But where to start? The camera is unfit for purpose, lurching as it labours to keep up with the eponymous lead. It frequently gets stuck on the floating islands that make up each stage, hiding behind rocks, trees and enemies. Rodea's gliding speed is patience-sappingly slow, seemingly to encourage you to hurry things along by hitting B for a boost, though this makes him much harder to control while depleting his energy far quicker. And so, as trails of collectibles and enemy positions seem designed to keep you airborne, half the time you spend soaring with arms outstretched is accompanied by a persistent bleep telling you it's time to land.

Touch down, however, and your colleague Ion will remind you that walking isn't the fastest way to get around, and to drive the point home she's willing to repeat the suggestion every few seconds. This isn't even the most irritating sound — that's a close call between

Boss battles manage the rare feat of being both laughably easy and frustratingly clunky, chiefly thanks to the capricious targeting. Still, it's good to see Team Ico's third colossus in gainful employment once again

Publisher NIS America
Developer Kadokawa Games, Prope
Format 3DS, Wii U (version tested)
Release Out now

GROUND PWNED
Should Rodea's flight energy run out he'll plummet earthward, with no way to speed his descent. As such, if you're above land, you'll sometimes face a long wait; if you're not, you'll soon be one life down. Abilities can be boosted by collecting parts from defeated enemies, although of course there's no way to extend air time. Your flying speed can be increased, however, but the most notable effect of doing so is that you drain the energy meter more rapidly still.

the intolerable performance of the voice actor playing Ion's grandfather, or the piercing noise that alerts you to the incoming projectiles that the camera likes to hide from view. Auto-targeting, meanwhile, is a not-at-all-amusing joke, the reticle as likely to pick out a piece of empty turf or a spent powerup capsule as the nearest foe, and that's before the ones with protective shields and retracting spikes show up, which leads to your GamePad being launched ungracefully across the room.

What's all the more galling is that many of *Rodea*'s problems didn't exist in its original form. The Wii version was finished four years ago, but was held back by its publisher so Kadokawa Games could port the game to 3DS and Wii U. Built around pointer controls, which not only allowed for superior manoeuvrability during flight but more accurate targeting, Prope's original hasn't been so much converted as butchered. Astonishingly, the game looks and performs markedly worse on Wii U than on older hardware, a muddier colour palette sapping away its former vibrancy, while the framerate has been halved from 60 to 30fps — and even the latter is beyond Kadokawa at times.

Prope's vision may not have been a classic, but this feels almost like a wilful act of sabotage. Like a fledgling with two broken wings, it would surely have been more humane to put the thing out of its misery than let it limp on in this pathetic state. **2**
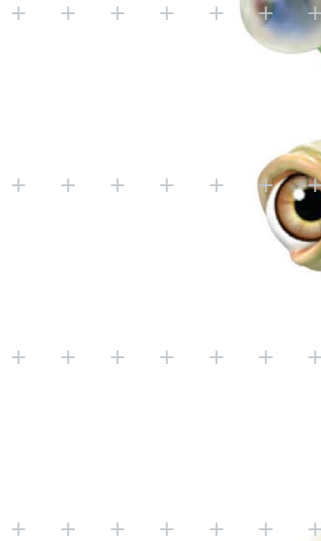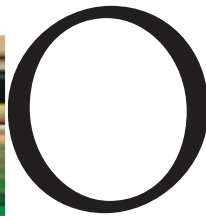
Spore

Why this overreaching mashup shouldn't be an evolutionary cul-de-sac for UGC

By Matt Clapham

Of course it had penises. Filters and reporting tools are one thing, but you might as well try to build a snowman on a heat lamp as attempt to stop the world's collective of PC-owning males from plastering wangs on everything they can. While the moderation of this impulse is the classic burden for all decentralised creative endeavours, where offline social mores do not apply, at least in most other contexts you aren't regularly sculpting a tube of flesh. Yet a cavalcade of sapient knobs was a small price to pay for the best bit of Maxis's captivatingly ambitious and crushingly disappointing departure from *The Sims*.

That bit being its suite of creative tools, a remarkable series of editors for populating *Spore*'s then-unfathomably vast procedural universe with your own creatures, vehicles and structures, plus the technological innovations to fill in the gaps with the works of others. Offering all that would be a not-insignificant technical challenge for any game, but it was unprecedented for one started in 2000, and even for one released in 2008. This, after all, was a period when procedural generation was best known for how it had been exploited in ancient titles such as *Elite* and *Rogue*, or in experimental demoscene productions and indie outliers such as *Dwarf Fortress*. It was also before *Minecraft* — and, to a lesser extent, *LittleBigPlanet* — instigated the cultural landslide that convinced the men in suits that user-generated content was the gilded key to Scrooge McDuck-like vaults of treasure. It still wasn't enough to satisfy the grand ambitions of Will Wright.

As befits a game with the working title of *SimEverything*, *Spore* would see the feted *Sims* creator and his team vastly overreach, also attempting to mash together top-down arcade-like action, 3D adventuring, RTS expansion and a simplified take on the 4X genre. The goal across the five stages — that's Cell, Creature, Tribal, Civilization and Space — was to simulate ascending the evolutionary, food and social chains from cellular life to star-conquering empire.

Predictably, that wide-angle view on all of life as we comprehend it meant that Maxis could focus on exactly none of the constituent parts adequately. While the Space segment was the most mechanically varied, every single stage of *Spore* failed to stand up as a complete slice of gameplay in its own right. What *Spore* did do successfully, however, was turn millions of players into 3D modellers.

Taking creatures as an example, the idea was enticingly simple: offer a vast box of ready-made parts, called Rigblocks internally, to be slapped onto a single, sculptable Play-Doh-like body. Rigblocks themselves were more than a little bit special, an array of simple deformation handles providing each hand, balcony, tyre, eye or spine with a kaleidoscope of potential sizes and forms, yet requiring only seconds to adjust in-game. Add procedural texturing and animation tools, and the world suddenly had access to My First Maya, expressing themselves through fully realised 3D art with minimal technical artistry required. Players relished the freedom: thanks to a mix of raw ingenuity, lawyer-baiting plagiarism and have-a-go spirit, the community had spawned over 30 million monstrosities just one month after release.

Minecraft would arrive less than a year later, but it was long enough after *Spore*'s first-wave buyers had emerged from the promising tidal pools of creature creation, found little dry land to subsist on and migrated. Mojang's project would slowly unfurl from its simple block-building origins to realise an increasing number of *Spore*'s ambitions. Like *Spore*, it offers a procedural landscape and a growing toolbox of ready-made parts with developer-designed properties to be plugged together as you see fit. Unlike *Spore*, whose complexity limits and parts attributes pushed players toward subsets of Rigblocks for the abilities needed to progress, the differences between Mojang's building blocks were are at once more pronounced and less prescriptive. The simple focus of Survival mode made *Minecraft* a far more fun sandbox to play in, too, suggesting objectives (build a shelter; make it better), while the spiralling potential complexity of new tools and materials offers a sense of meaningful progression in an open-ended way. But no game has yet bettered *Spore* ▶

in terms of its blend of ownership and dynamic shared space — that what you made would take on a new life beyond your control in other game worlds, just as what others created would in yours.

There's a possessive thrill to seeing your painstakingly crafted race of alien dragon-spiders skittering about the grassy plains of the Creature stage that even the most wondrous procedural generation algorithm has yet to match. Likewise, hovering over herds of bizarre three-legged grazers in your custom UFO takes on a different air when you're looking for intelligent design, inspecting them not with the eye of a consumer taking in the work of professional art staff or maths seed, but a fellow creator. Along with the generous dose of off-kilter Maxis charm, such personal creative investment was more than enough to carry a

seamlessly texture a staggering diversity of critters and objects, and how they could use Incremental Hamilton Code to populate empty fields with pseudo-random foliage. While the limitations of home computers at the time are evident in the eventual detail of the game, *Spore*'s technological foundations could easily have put together varied worlds enough to fill more than the Milky Way-like star map that served as the Space stage's

The Space stage's hyper-aggressive Grox were a pain, but terraforming worlds to seed with life and colonies was both a tech showcase and a novelty for players

IMAGINE WHAT OBSESSIONS IT COULD DRIVE WERE SPORE'S TECH HOUSED IN SOMETHING YOU WANTED TO PLAY

few playthroughs of even a disappointing game. Imagine what kinds of obsession it could drive were *Spore*'s long-forgotten tech housed within something you wanted to play for more than a few dozen hours.

If that sounds a little like star-gazing, then remember that many of the ideas and much of the procedural tech pioneered in *Spore* is currently being reinvented for a new generation. Here we are in 2015 boggling at the vast procedural universe of *No Man's Sky*, with its 18 quintillion planets, wondering how it could possibly generate so much playable matter and populate it with things to see and do. But in a series of SIGGRAPH talks back in 2007, Maxis artists were showing off how they generated a vast variety of spherical worlds from cube maps and script-controlled brushes, how they largely automated their UV process to

backdrop. These days, the likes of *Elite: Dangerous* and *No Man's Sky* are feeding new parameters into new equations, but they stand on the shoulders of giants. Yet it's all too easy to forget that a formative, high-profile stab at these ideas was made by a mainstream, publisher-funded sim game that many look back on as lightweight.

It's telling that the scant few words to emerge about the overall development process, as opposed to the well-published advancements of *Spore*'s technology, include a bald teardown of a cultural split at Maxis. After years of the studio's offices being a breeding ground for tool development but producing little that was playable, the conflict arose between the original 'sim' team (who saw *Spore* more as a toybox) and experienced hands brought on late to instil satisfying gameplay. Former *Civilization IV*

A fabled jump from scientific art style to cute looks is apparently bunkum, but the Cell stage's cartoon eyes and spikes certainly favour playfulness over authenticity

Spore continued to evolve for a while after release, first getting a deluge of new Rigblocks in the *Creepy & Cute* addon, and then expanding its creation tools with *Galactic Adventures*. This allowed players to appoint Captains to take on away missions during the Space phase, with a sample set made by Maxis designed to inspire a bevy of user-generated quests. A by-then unwieldy Sporepedia made filtering tough, however, while beefing up the best phase of the game felt like little more than a paid-for sticking plaster on a far deeper problem. Once again, *Minecraft* would do it properly, though Adventure mode was surely helped by plentiful YouTube coverage that highlighted the best and funniest player-made levels.

Despite all the talk of multiple paths, *Spore*'s creatures largely had to divide their time between socialising and fighting when not seeking the parts to improve their odds at dominance in both

lead designer Soren Johnson, who was part of the latter camp, personally identifies this divide as the cause of the awkward version of *Spore* that shipped. The problem certainly wasn't talent: Alex Hutchinson (*Assassin's Creed III*), Oculus Medium sculpting tool director Brian Sharp, and Chris Hecker (*SpyParty*) are all *Spore* alumni. But a division of vision is plain to see in the final package, as ahead-of-their-time creative tools and procedural tech were forced into strange contortions to look like a game.

Spore, then, should be viewed as a cautionary tale: the exemplar case that proves even the most dazzling tech demo 'game' is naught but a castle made of fog when put onto the retail shelf. But what is surprising, and wasteful, is that a rich seam of its unrealised ideas has lain untapped. While expansions would add user-made

missions, and 2011 spinoff *Darkspore* would resurrect the creature creator in cut-down form, no game since has redeemed the golden thread of creature construction and subsequent cross-pollination that won *Spore* most of the fans it ever made. Yet.

Of course, there's a stigma there: *Spore* sold in excess of two million copies in its early weeks on sale, but the series' returns have clearly diminished ever since. And now there's a template to follow, Rigblocks have been forgotten for the versatility of humble cubes. But for every misstep made, Will Wright is still a visionary, and nothing illustrates that better than a line from his TED talk of May 2007: "I think, personally, that toys can change the world."

Jump cut to 2015 and *Minecraft* et al have shown the oceans of potential in digital Lego married to a solid gameplay core. *Disney Infinity*'s Toy Box mode has demonstrated how much fun it can be to make up our own digital games for physical action figures. Toys have changed gaming, and some of the most popular games have incorporated elements of toys.

Which is why it's mysterious that *Spore*'s digital Play-Doh has been absent so long. But it won't be forever. Who else but Media Molecule to bring back sculpting forms organically and build a game around sharing the results? *Dreams* has parallels with what Maxis dreamt up 16 years ago, and now faces the timeless problem: when offering unbounded creative potential, how do you stop people just making dongs? ■

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JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

As we approach a new year of games writing, the time has come once more to create a set of resolutions to apply to the titles being created in 2016. Of course, like all resolutions, they're not worth anything and can get conveniently forgotten by March, but it's the principle of the thing.

The first resolution is to avoid flashbacks. I mean, who really likes flashbacks? It's impossible to see them without being aware that it's the most obvious way of telling you what you need to know or, worse, what you should already know. When you're in front of a flashback, you're not in the game or the story. You're simply learning something you'll need to call on later. And worse, you're thinking, 'When will this flashback be over?'

Resolution two is not hiring famous people as voices. The problem here is so many games are delighted to have secured the services of a star that they play up to it. "Wow. We've got Billy Famous-guy. Let's write stuff that sounds like Dr Murder because, ha ha, he's famous for playing Dr Murder in those films. Everyone will be aware that we've got Dr Murder on board. Our work here is done." The trouble is that a year later the game has a series of out-of-context and, gasp, unfunny asides, which only serve to remind the player that Billy Famous-guy was in a career downturn, had just come out of rehab and was going through a messy divorce, but can still impose his own brand of anarchy on three videogame dialogue writers and a bored audio engineer.

Resolution three is a biggie. We're going to steer clear of obvious plot twists. Yes, of course, a decent tale will have unexpected moments. Stories are by definition about overcoming obstacles and having the characters change and learn from them. But this year we're not going to employ the following tropes: (a) colleagues who turn out to be working for the other side; (b) devices that we spend the game retrieving only to end up unknowingly delivering to the foe, and we've done the heavy lifting for the bad guys all along; and (c) the game-changing uber

Any game in which you follow an NPC who travels faster than you can walk but slower than you can run must be cancelled

weapon we've been toting turns out not to be the weapon, after all – we're the weapon.

Resolution four. No. We're not going to try to write a new Trevor Philips-type character. Not now. Not ever. Shut up.

Resolution five. What if the zombies are us? What if the zombies are normal people driven to the edge by being constantly exposed to the Daily Mail website? What if we're driven to zombiedom by the world we've knowingly bought into? We'd have to shuffle towards an increasingly panicky army and police force, sure of victory only through our sheer numbers. This resolution isn't a

negative one. I really want to make this game. And 2016 is the year it'll happen. I just need a mindless team of hundreds to code it for me.

Resolution six. Let's not keep believing that finding out what happens next is its own reward. Yes, we can see there's a possibly fixable shuttle to that tantalisingly close and beguiling land over there. We know that's where we're headed, but we're already aware that what awaits us is a differently coloured map and the same weaponry but with twice the power. Oh, and the enemies there will be just slightly more than twice as hard to mow down.

There isn't a resolution seven. Unless you can unlock it. That will require the hidden resolution five b, which you missed. Go back. It'll be worth it. Or simply go to the **Edge** website and download it.

Women. They're resolution eight. All I need to say is untapped market. I could add the words social media, safeguards and kittens. None of this matters because females play the games they like, not the games that are written for them. Or do they? We should ask some. Should we? Oh, this is a minefield.

Resolution nine. Any game in which you have to follow or escort an NPC who travels faster than you can walk but slower than you can run must be cancelled, and those working on it must have their eyes put out. Bonus ear damage to the developer via a pool cue may be awarded if the NPC repeatedly utters no more than four random phrases along the lines of "keep up" or "where are you going?"

Resolution ten is a simple one. Let's not aim for edginess by putting swearing, harsh rap music and achingly now phrases like 'on fleek' and 'FOMO' in our games. As an industry we're chiefly fortysomething white guys who drive inappropriately sporty cars and prop our sunglasses on our heads. Our teenage children will not thank us for trying to be like them.

And there it is. A simple credo for a better videogame industry in 2016.

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#288
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